What is Chicago Wilderness?

Chicago Wilderness is some of the finest and most significant nature in the temperate world, with a core of roughly 300,000 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 193 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

For a complete list of Chicago Wilderness members, please visit the Web site at www.chicagowilderness.org.
Room for Improvement

Ten years ago, Chicago Wilderness was launched as a regional network of public and private organizations with the goal of protecting and restoring the biological diversity of the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Ambitious? Absolutely. Essential? Our regional well-being depends on it.

Today, Chicago Wilderness is 193 organizations and more than 250,000 acres of natural lands. As is proper, any organization ought to examine its progress toward its goals—hence The State of Our Chicago Wilderness: A Report Card on the Health of the Region’s Ecosystems issued in April. (See our article on page 6; a full version of the report is now available at www.chicagowilderness.org/pubprod). Several years in the making, the Report Card assesses the state of our region’s woods, wetlands, and grasslands and makes recommendations on how to improve the grades.

The progress report is mixed, frankly. Collectively, particularly in the counties surrounding Cook, we’ve done a good job acquiring open space and adding to the acres of protected natural lands. Our natural areas and native biodiversity are the envy of many other urban centers; these natural lands immensely enhance our quality of life in ways both measurable and sublime.

Yet, the condition of these natural communities is mostly fair or poor. Most received grades of “C” or “D.” We’ve increased the amount of protected holdings, but we haven’t gone to work restoring the habitat. The low grades are due to the encroachment of invasive species in grasslands and woodlands, the detrimental changes in water flows that cause wetlands degradation, lack of natural fire, pollution, and overpopulation of white-tailed deer.

Some natural areas are in excellent condition because they are being actively managed. Volunteers like Espie and Don Nelson (see page 26) and the staffs of land management agencies are assisting these places back to health, doing what nature in an urbanized area can no longer do for itself.

The Report Card stands as a call to action. We know what to do to get better grades; we just need to do it. And some of what we need to do is hard, kind of like buckling down to learn advanced calculus or master a Bach piano sonata.

Learning to love whole ecosystems requires so much more of us than learning to love a tree. Our affections attach to known places—a grove, a riverbank, a swimming hole, a meadow—not to large landscapes (or the teeming world of microorganisms beneath our feet).

Our tendency is to want to be in the picture. We are, after all, primates, and it is natural for us to establish our primacy. Yet in our eagerness to express our capacity for invention, to improve our homes, and to give full rein to our free society, we have lost our balance with the natural world.

I believe this will become the moral imperative of our time—to accept that we have an obligation to the rest of nature no less compelling than the one we have to our fellow human beings. To live in a just and free society, to respect the rights of others, means to live in “right relationship to the land community.” Indeed, what kind of creatures are we if we cannot use our distinctive capacities for love and learning to embrace ecosystems in full and to make amends? I submit that we are less than fully human if we think only of ourselves, if we do not embrace and sustain all of creation.

The world will open up to us if we are open to its lessons, its possibilities. Spend the summer discovering Chicago Wilderness and send us your reports. Your help is needed to improve our grades.
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Cover: To identify the common green darner (Anax junius), shown here on blue lobelia, hikers look for the "CBS eye" marking on its head. A strong flyer, this dragonfly lives at prairies and ponds regionwide. Photo by Lynn M. Stone.

Opposite: Yellow coneflower and wild bergamot lead up to a kame at Bluff Spring Fen in Elgin. Photo by Mike McDonald/ChicagoNature.com.
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Volume IX, Number 4

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VISIONS AND EMOTIONS

Dear Editor,
Thank you for Stephen Packard’s “Chicago Wilderness 2030: Visions for the Future” (CW, Spring ’06).

Stephen’s visions evoked unexpected tears and prompted me to reflect not only on his sense of the future, but on the miraculous phenomenon of human “vision” and its role in the unfolding saga of human habitation on the blue planet.

Presenting his vision in a public forum struck me as an act of profound giving and an authentically intimate one. There is really nothing more unique about each of us than the vision we hold.

Authentic visions bear no resemblance to wishful thinking. I was struck by the impressive inclusiveness and scope Stephen articulated. He was equally concretely detailed when envisioning a shadowed, dystopic future as he was when envisioning a healthy, utopian one. His visions extended beyond the span of his own life, and were thereby imbued with an ego-transcending poignance.

Deeply affecting, too, was the quintessential human, soulful love of place that so unmistakably pervaded Stephen’s visions. At their core is a spirit of large-hearted humaneness that represents humans and wilderness as ultimately inseparable.

Eliezer T. Margolis
Evaston, IL

Dear Stephen,
I was moved by your article in the latest Chicago WILDERNESS. It brought to the front of our minds what’s been hovering in the back. And of course, we’re getting excited about spring. There have been some colorful waterfowl stopping by the ponds and the lake at Northwestern University — this morning there were northern shovelers and wigeons, and I saw a loon fishing off the breakwater. The bloodroot is poking up outside our back door, always a happy event.

Sunny Balsam
Evaston, IL

Dear Editor,
First and foremost — thanks, Stephen. Vision is indeed preliminary and necessary for achievement. As I write, I am weary from volunteering on a 30-acre woodland burn down here in beautiful southern Illinois.

Seeds are sown in many ways. I am humbled by the many seeds (both physical and metaphorical) that you have planted. Indeed, think of the seeds sown by our common mentor, Dr. Robert Betz. I am a seed in training. Currently, I am finishing up my B.A. in plant biology and anticipate further work as a graduate student in prairie ecology. I am inspired by your vision of 2030. I am inspired by all that Chicago Wilderness means and stands for. I am inspired to plant seeds of my own and to “devote a major part of my life to it.” To the land. To the people. To the vision. Thank you.

Ryan E. Campbell
Carbondale, IL

GIANTS OFF THE CHARTS

Dear Editor,
I read your recent article regarding tree age (CW, Spring ’06), which compelled me to measure a very large sugar maple in the front of my farmhouse. It has a diameter of approximately 52.83 inches — off the charts per your article. I realize that your chart represents trees that grow in forests, but could our tree have grown that much faster? Or is it true that our tree may be over 200 years old?

Wade Butt
DeWitt, IA

Editors’ note: We received several calls about chart-busting trees, so we contacted Marlin Bowles and Michael Jones, the chart’s creators. Unfortunately, currently available methods for aging trees of this size use data from eastern states, where tree growth may differ. That sugar maple could be up to 300 years of age. But open-grown trees may have had very rapid growth, especially in optimum conditions. Bowles suggested that readers e-mail him at The Morton Arboretum for help estimating ages of large trees (mbowles@mortonarb.org).

DEER COMMISERATION

Dear Editor,
I saw your article on the devastating effect of deer on native plants — especially the trillium pictures (CW, Fall ’03). I can empathize. We live in Delafield, Wisconsin, and my husband and I have removed all the invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle. When a landscaper came over, he was surprised — no native plants growing. The deer have destroyed everything. We have a herd of six that come to our yard every night. They eat everything we put out — wild geranium, bellwort, wood anemone, white baneberry, and Solomon’s seal. When we first removed the buckthorn, some baneberry and Solomon’s seal came up, only to be eaten. They even ate some onion!

Now, as a last resort, my husband built a 16’ x 10’ pergola with a fence around it to keep out the deer. I have planted some of my trillium and they are doing fine. I could do so much more to restore our 1.5-acre lot; unfortunately, for now, the deer have the upper hand.

I have contacted the mayor and DNR, but since we live in the city, no hunting. We definitely need a reduction in deer because they are redesigning the landscape and creating an ecological disaster.

Mary Lou Qualler
Delafield, WI

CHICAGO WILDERNESS SEeks ESSAYS:

What does ‘Chicago Wilderness’ mean to you?

Has your life been affected by the concept, the coalition, the region’s nature, or something else? We’re looking for short essays (under 400 words) from our readers. We will feature selections in an upcoming issue.

Send by July 1, 2006 to:
news@chicagowildernessmag.org or
5226 Old Orchard Rd, Suite 37, Skokie IL 60077.
Chicago Wilderness Slinks Home with a Bad Report Card

Despite some shining exceptions, this region’s outstanding nature is in trouble with the principal. If our natural areas were students, they’d be grounded.
Leon Halloran is working away at a patch of buckthorn and green ash that have invaded a savanna at Bluff Spring Fen in Elgin. In the more than 25 years of work to restore this 90-acre site—one of the two best fen complexes in Illinois—he has seen a brushy mess with small pockets of richness gradually transform into a gorgeous restored treasure. The Friends of the Fen volunteers and their staff supporters know that they've done a lot of good: Not only can they see it in the acres of native wildflowers that bloom each spring and summer, they've also measured the ecological health of the place, performing scientific surveys of plants and animals there.

Bluff Spring Fen is one of hundreds of sites across the Chicago Wilderness region that have been lucky enough to receive the caring attention of conservation agencies with their cadres of volunteers dedicated to specific places on the landscape. At these sites, people have a good idea of how things are going, ecologically speaking.

But the major conservation challenge facing the Chicago region these days is the thousands of other "preserved" sites that aren't receiving this kind of attention. Though protected from development in conservation purchases, often decades ago, the majority—60 or 70 percent for some agencies—aren't being managed. They have been subjected to many decades' worth of changes like nothing they have experienced before: roads, development, invasive species. Their historical custodians—American Indians, large predators, and fire—have been taken away. In short, they've been orphaned in a world that is becoming more and more hostile to them.

That's why they are failing in the recent "report card" (though who ever got a 167-page report card?), entitled *The State of Our Chicago Wilderness*, released this April by the Chicago Wilderness consortium on the tenth anniversary of its establishment.

The two-year study is the only one in the nation, perhaps the world, to rate ecological wholeness on a regional scale and establish a baseline condition from which to measure progress. A collaborative effort supported by the 193 organizations that make up the coalition, the report card engaged more than 100 scientists and naturalists to take a critical and quantitative look at the 250,000 acres of preserves and wild places in their care.

*How Nature Scored*

So what is the ecological state of natural areas in Chicago Wilderness? To put it bluntly, if our natural areas were students, they would expect to be grounded, perhaps even spanked. They'd be skulking home with a crop of C's and D's.
Those grades reflect the thousands of wild places whose vitality is being compromised by an overall lack of active intervention. "If your child came home with a report card like this, you’d do something about it," said Karen Glennemeier of Audubon-Chicago Region, one of the report’s compilers. “You’d turn off the TV and get serious.”

The report card assigned grades to a range of ecosystem types and animal groups. The grades are a snapshot of each classification, showing where each ranks along a spectrum of biodiversity quality. An “A” or “excellent” grade indicates stable, high-quality communities with much biodiversity. “B” or “good” means stable communities with much biodiversity, though not all of high quality. Unfortunately, none of the categories received either of those.

Wooded lands scored a D+. That’s a “poor” grade, indicating rapid biodiversity loss, or a general lack of biological quality. Our wooded lands may appear green to the average observer, but they’re a sickly green, increasingly made up of invasive species such as buckthorn, box elder, and garlic mustard. When such bullies are around, true nature disappears.

Prairies received a D. Chicago Wilderness is famous for some shining examples of remnant tallgrass prairie. But most of our grasslands are former agricultural land, unrestored, and rapidly “brushing in”—a lot of potential, but little biodiversity.

In the face of increased development that pollutes water and alters its flow, our wetlands scored a D+. It didn’t help that they’ve got their own invasive species to deal with, including purple loosestrife, reed canary grass, and brush of various kinds.

Streams and lakes did slightly better, with a C- and a C, respectively. But that’s only because of a handful of pristine waterways that development hasn’t reached yet. In the report card’s system, a “C” or “fair” indicates either a moderate amount of biodiversity remaining, or quite a bit of biodiversity that’s declining.

Okay. So far, not so good. Sad, anxious, depressed? Don’t be, say the report card compilers. It’s a big step forward to know where we stand. If we recognize the problem, we can do something about it. Also on the bright side: In recent years, landowners have added more than 20,000 acres to preserves and conservation districts. And although no overall natural community type scored an A or a B, the report card does highlight individual places that are maintaining their richness. At the head of the class are preserves such as Bluff Spring Fen, Middlefork Savanna near Lake Forest, the restored Nippersink Creek in McHenry County, and Chiswaukee Prairie. These serve as examples of how vigor can be restored if there is the wherewithal and will to make it happen. On a regional scale, it’s a matter of increasing the quantity of intensive conservation work being done, says Glennemeier. “We know what to do, and we’re doing it. We just need to do more of it.”

**Rating the Animals**

The major groups of animals that the report card evaluated fared only slightly better than the ecosystems. In most cases, their poor grades reflected the diminishing quality of the habitats in which they live (or fail to live).

Even with exciting improvements such as sandhill and whooping cranes on the comeback, and those spectacular warbler migrations twice a year, birds scored a C-.. Blame it on the small and struggling populations of grassland birds—bobolinks, meadowlarks and Henslow’s sparrows. While many groups of species are improving, grassland and shrubland birds are still reeling on the edge without enough open habitat in which to live and breed.

Report card compilers gave a C- to reptiles and amphibians, which are declining regionwide. Hemmed in to diminishing natural areas, turtles, salamanders, and frogs risk mass deaths
crossing roads to make their small migrations for breeding. Pollution is also a factor for the thin-skinned amphibians.

Although mosquitoes seem to be doing just fine (if their attendance at picnics is any indication), Chicago Wilderness rated the ecological health of conservative insect populations at C-. "Of our region's 5,000 to 6,000 insect species," the report explained, "as many as 1,000 species are considered 'conservative,' meaning they require high-quality habitat to survive and are therefore of conservation concern." It's these bugs—which include butterflies, dragonflies, and so many others—that are at considerable risk. Some species survive in our region at just a few preserves, some no larger than a few acres.

Lowest, but not least in the animal kingdom, the fish of Chicago Wilderness received a D+. If a river gets polluted, becomes silty, or gets dammed, sensitive fish disappear. According to the report, no fish community is improving, although some appear to be stable.

**Attitude Improvement**

Though the report card gave no grades in this category, it noted a general upturn in positive attitudes toward nature conservation by the public, often expressed with tangible support. In the last decade, voters have approved two dozen referenda, generating more than $540 million available for conservation initiatives. Thousands of volunteers provide more than 66,000 hours annually of donated labor valued at more than $1 million. And the number of municipal ordinances encouraging sustainable development has increased.

If new policies that promote healthy natural communities are to be enacted throughout the region, widespread public support, including that generated by increased nature education in schools, is crucial. "That is our greatest challenge," said Bruce Boyd, executive director of the Illinois Nature Conservancy. "We have to do a better job of helping people understand why these places are important for all of us and the various functions of these natural communities. It’s not just about plants and animals. Those natural areas also provide wonderful recreational opportunities and play a valuable role in cleaning the air and our water."

**Turning Nature Into Numbers**

The report card is a big step toward more standardized testing and accountability, a kind of "No Preserve Left Behind" program. Fortunately for natural areas, such improved quantitative measures will also help provide land managers with better tools and funds to give preserves the specialized, qualitative, one-on-one attention they need.

"We are doing a lot of work collectively in Chicago Wilderness to restore lands, but we have to be able to measure progress," said John Rogner, field supervisor of the Chicago regional office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which participated in the study. "This report gives us a baseline condition of the ecological status of the land."

The compilers of the report card were charged with determining the ecological quality of 250,000 acres, an area comparable to 32 O'Hare Airports but scattered in thousands of fragments from southeast Wisconsin to northwest Indiana. They found that the records needed to precisely analyze the condition of the whole organism known as Chicago Wilderness were either nonexistent or incompatible from one agency to another. "There's a lot of systematic and scientific monitoring," Rogner said, "but much of it is very uneven in its coverage of species and communities."

That meant the compilers made use of the best data available. One early attempt to characterize the lands on a broad scale, conducted by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County in the 1990s, determined the average land quality as "poor." As a result, that district dramatically increased its staffing and budget for land management. Friends of the Forest Preserves, Audubon, and the Sierra Club subsequently organized a similar study, of more than twice as much land, for Cook County. (Both studies made use of trained volunteers and professional botanists.) When the Cook County Forest Preserve Board learned that 57 percent of its woodlands and 71 percent of its wetlands were in poor condition, and that, system-wide, 68 percent of the natural lands deserved a "D," the board increased the land management budget and created a new Department of Resource Management to turn the preserves around.

The first study to examine the entire region in this much detail was the Chicago Wilderness Woods Audit, conducted in 2001. It determined that unmanaged bur oak woods were being lost the fastest, followed by the white oak woods.

**BRIGHT SPOTS**

Chicago Wilderness has numerous preserves that serve as models for what could be. This restored wetland at Flint Creek Savanna in Barrington shows promising recovery. If about 200,000 more acres improved similarly, we would bring home a great report card.
Most ecosystem types have not been the subjects of a comprehensive regional study like the Woods Audit, but a wide variety of studies have been conducted over the years by forest preserve districts, the Illinois Natural History Survey, and other agencies. For this report card, Chicago Wilderness sought out, consulted, and brought together in workshops the people who created those earlier studies to judge data and extrapolate it to determine the current regional grades.

The report card challenges scientists to create a regional repository of data on each of the natural communities and species assemblages in Chicago Wilderness. Agencies must agree on a common language and protocol for collecting and reporting data on plants and animals. Getting these scientists to do all this sharing is expected to be arduous (perhaps only slightly easier than getting our national security agencies to share intelligence). Even so, the Illinois Natural History Survey has begun to survey Chicago Wilderness members on how information is collected and recorded. The agency’s end goal is to establish a regionwide data collection system that makes the best use of staff and volunteer resources.

Such a clearinghouse will be invaluable in further specifying conservation priorities and setting measurable goals, say compilers. They also expect it to be a powerful resource in conveying to funders and the public not only the easily visible local successes but the entire scope of the regional restoration challenge.

**Improving the Grades**

Participants hope this report card will be the first of many. Despite the seemingly dire prognosis, a large part of Chicago Wilderness has the ability to return to wholeness. The network of remnant prairies, woodlands, and wetlands that have blossomed under the ministrations of land managers is an “ark” of sorts, a collection of every kind of functioning ecological community that existed in the region. From these places, degraded lands—our unfortunate C’s and Ds—can be restored.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

To improve the region’s ecological health, the Report Card makes a number of recommendations. Some highlights:

- Adopt regionwide recovery goals and meet them.
- Create site-specific management plans.
- Develop baseline data for natural communities.
- Create common language and ways of collecting information to be adopted by all agencies.
- Create a regionwide repository for storing data.
- Secure more participation from other agencies, including governments, schools, and community groups.
- Create greenways along streams and restore wetlands.
- Adopt local ordinances that encourage conservation.
- Develop educational standards that ensure that graduating students are biodiversity-literate.
- Make local biodiversity a part of higher education degree programs.
- Schedule a second report card.

Visit chicagowildernessmag.org and click on “How Do I Get Involved?” for a list of ways you can help improve the state of Chicago Wilderness.

**PROTECT MY HOME**

Endangered in Illinois, the black-crowned night-heron still breeds in the Calumet region. But here, as everywhere, its future depends on habitat protection and restoration.

Active management, say report card compilers, will restore our biodiversity and earn natural areas better grades. The report prescribes more invasive species control, control of problem animals such as deer, and other active management including the use of controlled burns.

New land acquisitions—especially in key areas where sprawl is rampant—are also critical. “But relying on acquisition alone is like when a community builds a school and then fails to provide enough funds for good teachers and books,” said Rogner. “The administrators can say the kids are getting an education, but really they’re languishing.” And it is not practical, say compilers, to expect taxing bodies such as forest preserve and park districts to pay for everything. Developers, private landowners, and municipalities must become partners.

The report urges governments to enact stronger development ordinances that protect natural communities and open space, just as laws regulate transportation needs and infrastructure.

Chicago Wilderness says it will issue another report card in five to ten years. What will the region’s natural areas look like by then? Will we be paying more attention to our last wild places? Can Chicago Wilderness reach a balance between the built and natural environment?

“It depends on whether you are an optimist or pessimist,” Rogner said. “I do say it is achievable but can’t say when. The important thing is to strive and not go backward.”

“Our children and grandchildren are going to thank us,” Glennemeier said, “for taking this challenge head-on.”

Contributors to this article include contributing editor LeAnn Spencer, the editors of Chicago WILDERNESS, and the staff of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.
The Corporate Council of Chicago Wilderness is proud to join in celebrating 10 years of cooperative conservation.

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Call Janet Gow at Chicago Wilderness, 312-560-2138 or e-mail jgow@chicagowilderness.org

CHICAGO WILDERNESS Corporate Council
At first the prairie teems at your feet. Two weeks later, it’s licking at your knees, then your waist, then chest—and with each new visit comes a whole new array of flowers and animals. Prairies hit their stride in the hottest months of the year, so take a trip through the grassland summertime.

JUNE

In May and June, the shooting stars at Chiwaukee Prairie along the Wisconsin-Illinois border (above) are rich and dense, thanks to a recent fire, which burned a few years’ growth off of encroaching shrubs. The uncommon eastern blue-eyed grass (at right) hides away in sandier prairies. Also in June, sandhill cranes nest in wet prairies. Without the animals, a prairie isn’t a prairie.
By July, spring flora is history. This time of year, it is easier to understand the prairie as a product of extremes. The plants and animals here evolved to succeed in drought, fire, and beating sun. Insects, such as this fritillary nectaring on a prairie milkweed, depend on these hot months to breed.

Bobolinks, which breed on the prairie, peer up from prairie dock and purple prairie clover, conducting surveillance. At Kankakee Sands, a fern spreads out with blazing star.
AUGUST

Prairie wildflowers and grasses grow tall. Though many short flowers also persist, taller species generally replace shorter ones as the season progresses. Many showy species bloom. Compass plant, prairie dock, and sunflowers reach full height—six feet or more. At Lockport Prairie, a morning haze cloaks nodding wild onion. A picture wing fly stops to rest. Savanna plants such as the showy goldenrod and rough blazing star grow between scattered trees.
**SEPTEMBER**

Even before the air cools, the prairie feels September's winds of change. Goldenrod brightens the land, but the sun is less intense. Tall plants offer every shape of seed, adopting shades of brown and red (though many greens remain). As plants go dormant, small surprises—gentians and asters—poke up from below. The northern harrier arrives, gliding low on the hunt. The prairie is preparing for winter. Before long, it will be covered in snow. In spring, plants reemerge, pushing through the dead thatch from last summer, or from the fresh black slate of a spring burn.
A few decades ago, most people wouldn't have known a true prairie from a field of weeds. But more of us are learning to really "see" prairies—as ever-new dramas of wildlife, plants, and people.

Compiled by Don Parker

## Into the Wild: Appreciating Prairies

### Seeing Differently
Some people (many in speeding cars) mistakenly operate under the notion that prairies are flat, weedy, and boring. But spend an hour or more in an actual, healthy prairie, and you start to notice spectacular colors, shapes, and phenomena. Subtle differences in plants will loudly announce undulations in the landscape. Slow down, learn, and let the prairie talk.

**What to Do**
- Apart from hiking, botanizing, birdwatching, photographing, meditating, fresh-air breathing, secret telling, ecology studying, snacking, flower smelling, singing, sky watching, mating-animal spying, checking out bugs, feeling unexpected textures, smelling remarkable smells, finding something sacred, getting a partial tan, seeing the horizon, exercising for a change, feeling expansive, feeling humble, drawing, painting, writing, observing, and devising your five-year plan even though you probably won't stick to it, there is nothing to do in a prairie. Sorry to say.

**Where to Go**
- Seen one, seen 'em all? Think again. The classic blacksoil grassland at Wolf Road Prairie has remarkably different plants and animals from the swell-and-swale sand prairie at Illinois Beach, the dry hill prairie at Shoe Factory Road, and the wet swales of West Chicago Prairie. (For preserve profiles, click "Into the Wild" at chicagowildernessmag.org.)

**Timing is Everything**
- If you take a trip at noon on the hottest day of the summer, you're liable to think that prairies are cruel, hot places full of butterflies. But try crepuscularity, an exciting lifestyle espoused by many prairie animals. Get active at dawn, before the soft sunshine has burned off the dew. Or visit in the evening, when the cool, orange light warms every prairie flower and grass.

### Prairie Preparation
- **Hydrate** Bring lots of water. Drink it.
- **Protect yourself from sun & scratches** Wear a wide-brimmed hat, closed-toed shoes, long pants and shirt, sunscreen. Duck into a shady grove at midday.
- **Repel bugs** Check your whole body for ticks within 24 hours. A partner can help. Ward off chiggers with a little bug spray on your ankles.
- **See far in the wide-open spaces** Bring binoculars.
- **Prepare for wind** Prairies get windier than woods. Bring lip balm. If cold, dress for windchill.
- **Avoid lightning** A prairie is a poor place to be in a lightning storm. If one sneaks up on you, head for (in order of preference): a building, your car, a woods (but stay away from the biggest trees, and never seek refuge under a lone tree). Not options? Lie flat or get low until the storm passes.

### The Ring of Fire
You haven't experienced prairie until you've seen a living, breathing fire sweep across it. Afterwards, the ground is deep black. In spring, it can green up in two weeks, with especially lush flowers the next summer. Be a "burn chaser"—learn where agencies burned, and witness the inspiring aftermath. (Visit chicagowildernessmag.org/burns to locate recently burned preserves.) Or take a burn training course and join a burn crew yourself, (847) 242-6424.
IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG for modern-day trailblazers to see that there’s more than prairie at Kloempken Prairie in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Heading off in any direction from Parking Lot C at Oakton Community College, visitors come face to face with a number of diverse communities — maple forest, sedge meadows, prairie, wetlands, and oak woods.

South from the parking lot, look through the swamp white oak flatwoods for a well-lit clearing. A short walk lands visitors in the preserve’s most diverse prairie patch, full of sawtooth sunflower, blazing star, and compass plant.

Historically, the preserve was savanna — prairie interspersed with stands of oak and hickory. Farmers cleared and plowed most of the land for crops during the 1800s. In the 1940s, the Forest Preserve District purchased the site.

Hard work and the reintroduction of fire through controlled burns have brought Kloempken Prairie to its current condition. Restoration began in the late 1980s. Since the 1990s, volunteers with the Des Plaines River Valley Restoration Project have worked to expand several patches of prairie. Today they actively manage about 60 acres.

Restoration has uncovered hidden treasures. Three years ago, crews cleared buckthorn from the flatwoods near the preserve entrance, found high-quality sedges and swamp black ash growing with the swamp white oak.

In the center of the preserve, beautiful Carle Woods has sugar maples, hackberries, white and red oaks (some at least 200 years old), and musclewood.

"There are very few places where I’ve seen musclewood, and there are quite a few of them here," says preserve steward Bob Hostetler. "The bark is sinewy, interesting."

Just to the west of Carle Woods, the area becomes Oakton property. But restoration does not stop at the forest preserve boundaries. Blending seamlessly with the Kloempken effort, Oakton students and staff have restored roughly 55 acres on the adjacent campus, including a former landfill.

According to Ken Schaefer, the naturalist and groundskeeper at Oakton who has worked on restoration at the college since 1991, the landfill sank several years ago and water began collecting. Wetland and wet prairie plants started growing. The area has become home to sora, killdeer, snakes, frogs, toads, and other fauna.

Across College Drive, visitors will come upon upland woods along the Des Plaines River — a peaceful place to watch great blue herons make low passes. Oaks thrive here, particularly with the reintroduction of fire. In the summer, the dappled sunlight peaks through the trees and gives this area a calming sense of otherworldliness.

Hostetler recommends visiting Kloempken Prairie during the weekend, since Parking Lot C, which provides easiest access to the preserve, is reserved for college staff during the week. A few spaces, on College Drive just north of Golf Road, are open all week.

— Deborah Kadin
Into the Wild: Lake County, IL
Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve

AN UNEXPECTED SENSE OF HEIGHT strikes visitors who enter Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve in Highland Park, Illinois. From the entrance drive, which leads over the deep Hutchinson Ravine, to the view of beach dunes and Lake Michigan off the majestic bluff, this site offers a unique perspective on 0.75 miles of shoreline, now accessible to the public for the first time in 100 years.

The 274-acre preserve was acquired in parcels by the Lake County Forest Preserves after the U.S. Army closed its base at Fort Sheridan in 1993. For the past several years, work has been underway to restore the site and preserve its natural and human history.

Because it hugs the Lake Michigan shoreline, Fort Sheridan is home to many species not found elsewhere in the region. "The ravines here are unique because the lake waters cool the immediate shoreline in the summer while warming the same area in the winter," says Ken Klick, a Forest Preserve District restoration ecologist. "The buffering of weather extremes is what allows many northern plants to occur at Fort Sheridan while just a few miles inland they're eliminated because of those extremes."

Native huckleberry, Canada mayflower, spreading juniper, and paper birch grow among the oaks and maples that cover the preserve. On a slope down to the lake stand two arborvitae evergreens, thought to be the only wild, native arborvitae in Lake County. Visitors might also find other rare species, such as American dog violet, sea rocket, and buffaloberry here. After a recent controlled burn, the district seeded Hutchinson Ravine with a variety of species, including Jack-in-the-pulpit, bottlebrush grass, and rue anemone.

A great variety of birds, including cerulean warblers, scarlet tanagers, and vireos, migrate through, following the shoreline. A planned viewing area will include interpretive signage about these species.

New trails and a parking area are now open at the preserve. Swimming and boating, however, are not allowed on this section of Lake Michigan.

At a Glance
THE SCENE Glacial moraine featuring 100-foot bluffs above Lake Michigan, wooded ravines, prairie, and dunes
HIGHLIGHTS Trail bridge over ravine, excellent lakefront birding
STATS 274 acres, 1.3 miles of paved trail, and 0.3 miles of woodchip trail

BEHIND THE SCENES Construction of a public golf course will redirect excess rain and snowmelt away from the sensitive ravines to lessen erosion

GETTING THERE From the entrance at Old Elm Rd and Sheridan Rd in Highland Park, turn left on Leonard Wood Dr., and left on Gilgare Rd. to the parking area

Two asphalt trails provide 1.3 miles for hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing. An additional 0.3-mile woodchip trail is open to hiking and skiing. The trail also features an expansive bridge over an ecologically sensitive ravine, and connects to the North Shore Bike Path at Sheridan Road.

Several self-guided educational exhibits highlight the unique ecology and history of the site, including a walk-through replica of a red-tailed hawk's nest large enough to accommodate as many as 20 school children. The nest is cradled among the trees overlooking the ravines and features a "hawk's-eye view" through a specially designed viewing station.

Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve is open daily from 6:30 a.m. until sunset. Dogs are welcome on a leash. For more information, call (847) 367-6640 or visit lcfpd.org.

— Terry Stephan
Lockport Prairie

by Paula McHugh

COME SPRING, Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve's rare, living treasures emerge from their protective hiding places. This shallow-soiled floodplain prairie, scourged by monstrous surges of glacial meltwater 12,000 years ago, is truly unique in Chicago Wilderness. The 254-acre site is owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago and managed by the Forest Preserve District of Will County.

A family of coots dives the depths of a marsh pond. And while the sun might bake this feeding pond to brownish muck by midsummer, shallow, slow seeps of cool, calcium-rich water supply tiny, federally-endangered Hine's emerald dragonfly nymphs with what they need to thrive. It will take the nymphs two to three years to emerge as adults. Their livelihood depends on conditions found on this ecologically significant rectangle of dolomite prairie. If not swallowed up by a bird or turtle, new dragonflies will be cruising for mosquito and gnat meals amid the cattails. Look for their brilliant green eyes.

Ideal times for seeing a Hine's emerald dragonfly spinning across the road or alighting on a flowering cattail are on still mornings between 9 and noon during June and July. But catching a glimpse of this rare creature is only one of many reasons to visit Lockport Prairie during the summer season.

An abbreviated strip of asphalt, Division Street, leads into Lockport Prairie, which is bounded by Route 53 to the west, Route 7 to the north, and the Des Plaines River to the east. The road through the prairie dead-ends at a former railroad swing bridge at the edge of the river. This dead-end cordon off this exceptional prairie habitat from other attractions within the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor.

Visitors can take in a sweeping overview of Lockport Prairie by standing midway along the road. The oak-lined bluffs bordering Route 53, carved by glacial activity, conceal the seeps that sustain the wet dolomite prairie. The bluff area, recently cleared of invasive buckthorn, has been noted as a foraging spot for the Hine's.

The only designated walking trail within this fragile prairie stems south from the road near a kiosk. Hikers who walk the mostly flat, quarter-mile path can view exposed slabs, or "roofs" of pale gray limestone, which become less visible as summer's flora peaks. A rich palette of plants grows in the preserve's shallow soil, including sati grass, Ohio horsemint, purple meadow rue, vervain, oyster plant, wild onion, and goldenrod.

The preserve's unique conditions also foster two endangered plant species: the leafy prairie-clover, which thrives in dry summer heat, and the lakeside daisy, which was reintroduced here.

The footpath passes natural rivulets that curiously resemble miniature versions of the 19th-century manmade canal system across the river in the city of Lockport. Resident muskrats, coyotes, foxes, snakes, and voles hide from view,
yet one may encounter silent remains of their life-and-death dramas along the path. Currently, the walk through sedge meadow and fen terminates at the edge of the floodplain forest, although plans for a loop trail are underway.

The Forest Preserve District will provide interpreter-led public tours of Lockport Prairie this summer, at 6 p.m. on June 21, July 5, and August 23. Call (815) 727-8700 for more information.

Daytripping

Once a center for shipping traffic on one of the nation’s most important canals, the City of Lockport boasts 37 structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Several are constructed of the same dolomite limestone that underlies Lockport Prairie.

An excellent (and free) self-guided walking tour map of Main Street is available at the I&M Canal Visitor Center in the Gaylord Building at 200 W. 8th Street, (815) 838-1100. Built in 1838, this building houses three floors of canal history. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 6.

Walk or bike along Lockport’s portion of the I&M Canal Trail, which stretches from the town’s old canal boatyard site at 4th Street to the 1845 limestone Lock #1 at 15th and Division Streets. Kids can roam a reconstructed Pioneer Village just steps from the Gaylord Building. Head south along the canal towpath and visit the Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery in the historic Norton Building, 201 W. 10th Street, (815) 838-7400. A fine exhibit, “Gifted Quilts,” runs through Labor Day. Rest and renew within the charming courtyard just outside the gallery. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5.

Around the corner is the Will County Historical Society, 803 S. State, headquarters of the I&M Canal Commission during the canal’s construction in the mid-1800s. Open daily, 1 to 4:30 p.m., except Mondays.

Foraging

The newly opened 10th Street Café, 110 W. 10th Street, (815) 588-0134, is just a few steps from the Norton Building and the I&M Canal Path. House in a vintage limestone building, it offers hearty eats-in or take-out soups, sandwiches, and yummy desserts. Fill up at the salad bar or build your own turkey, ham, or panini. Open 5 a.m. until 2 p.m. weekdays; 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays.

If linen tablecloths and wait service are more to your liking, then enjoy a view of the canal path from the high-arched windows of the four-star Public Landing Restaurant, in the Gaylord Building, 200 W. 8th Street, (815) 838-6500. Open Tuesday through Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 7 p.m.

Hot summer days call for ice cream treats. Cool Creations at 937 Hamilton Street, (815) 838-4700, serves up plentiful scoops of your favorite flavors, plus brownies and other confections.

Bedding Down

Nearby Messenger Woods offers campers a place to kick back and enjoy cool shade and starlight slumber within an old-growth oak and maple forest. Walk off a meal by enjoying a ramble along a two-mile scenic loop trail. This Will County forest preserve is located on Bruce Road, north of Route 6 (Southwest Highway) and east of Cedar.

At a Glance

THE SCENE: Glacially formed dolomite prairie between the Des Plaines River and bluffe, supporting more than 100 rare species within its marshes, prairie, and sedge meadows

HIGHLIGHTS: Rare seeps sustain the endangered Hine’s emerald dragonfly

STATS: 254 acres, with quarter-mile footpath

BEHIND THE SCENES: The Forest Preserve District is working with legislators and adjacent Stateville Prison to protect the groundwater that feeds Lockport’s unique seeps

GETTING THERE: Take I-55 south to Rte 53. Continue south past the intersection of Rte 7 to Division St and turn left into the preserve. From I-80, take Rte 53 north through Joliet to Division St (right turn). Prairie entrance is just east of Stateville Prison entrance

Road, in rural Lockport. Reserve your campsite at (815) 727-8700.

Events

The City of Lockport celebrates its heritage with its annual Old Canal Days Festival the third weekend of June. A carnival and parade kicks off events, June 14–18. For information, call (815) 838-4744.

Lockport Township Park District Summer Performing Arts Concerts.

In Dellwood Park, Wednesday evenings, June through August. Call (815) 838-1183. Free.

Want to know more?

For more information and links to all of the natural and cultural destinations mentioned here, please visit us at chicagowildernessmag.org/issues/summer2006/weekendexplorer.html.

Historic Lockport, within minutes of the prairie.

Photo: Dave Jagodzinski

Summer 2006
Early Summer

**SACK LIFE**

Life in a hanging house cannot be comfortable, especially if you're squished with squirming, squawking siblings. But the pendulous nest of the Baltimore oriole isn't intended for long-term housing; the brood will fledge after a few weeks. During early summer, the young will learn the important lessons of oriole life while living high in the canopy. By July, they should be flying and perching and eating little hairy caterpillars with ease. In the post-breeding season — at the end of summer — the juveniles will hang with mom, while the fathers take off to live solo.

**BUTTERFLIES AND BLUES**

Eastern-tailed blues are small butterflies with barely a one-inch wingspan. Both male and female have a cute little tail on each hind wing. The females are an attractive brown with two small orange crescents on the pale, blue-gray underside. Adult males, especially those in late summer, have dark, iridescent blue wings. Eastern-tailed blues are city dwellers and can be found in most open areas.

Many years ago, I bumped into some eastern-tailed blues in the parking lot of the Jazz Record Mart on Grand Avenue, near State Street in Chicago. I was watching them while standing in the parking lot of the best blues record store in the universe. "Eastern-tailed blues" sounds like the name of some old Delmark recording. Like, wow, daddio.

Middle Summer

**PRECIOUS GEM**

Medically speaking, I think jewelweed is vastly overrated. Following a decade of semi-intentional self-experimentation, I've learned the mucilaginous sap of jewelweed is no more effective against poison ivy than pump water. Science agrees with me. Contrary to popular belief and countless testimonials, a number of investigations have demonstrated jewelweed extract was not effective in prevention or treatment of allergic contact dermatitis from urishiol oil. Too bad.

Our jewelweed comes in two colors, yellow and orange. Both species have brightly colored flowers, succulent stems, and pale green foliage. The elliptical leaves of jewelweed collect beads of morning dew, looking exactly like drops of mercury.

**BLUE BROODS**

Young bluebirds develop quickly. Only 20 days after entering the world, the brood will leave the nest. Just six weeks after hatching they'll be hunting their own crickets and katydids. The young are mousy gray in color. Their brilliant blue hue won't be apparent until after losing their feathers in post-juvenile molt. Most bluebirds will raise two families during the summer.

Late Summer

**CHICAGO BULLS**

Some of the most impressive serpents of Chicago Wilderness are the big bull snakes of the Kankakee sand prairies. They're big (close to six feet long) and love to hiss. They have rich brown spots on a golden background and several black bands near their tail. They spend their summer days searching the interiors of rodent burrows for a meal. Bull snakes can't tolerate thick muck and are not found out of their habitat of loose, sandy soil. The only bull snake recorded in Cook County that I know of — a young one found caught in a sticky mouse trap behind a Calumet restaurant — is believed to be an escaped captive.

**SIDEWAYS GRASS**

I really dig grasses. One of the prettiest local species is side oats grama. Its name describes the oat-like seeds that hang uniformly, lined up on one side of the slender, zig-zag stem. In late summer, look at the flowers through a magnifying glass. The plant's reproductive organs — bright red anthers and feathery, white stigmas — will blow your mind.

Side oats grama is a dominant grass of dry hilltop prairies. It tolerates extreme heat. Scientists say the range of side oats grama expanded during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s. In the Chicago Wilderness, it can be found in most prairie restoration areas.

Illustrations: Karl A. Urban
It was a summer project begun on a whim, an excuse for leisurely strolls around the neighborhood. How many bugs could I photograph in Hyde Park, the community that surrounds the University of Chicago on the South Side of the city? To make matters more interesting, I decided to restrict my attention to the residential rectangle bordered by 56th Street on the north and 58th on the south; east and west boundaries were Stony Island and Ellis Avenues, respectively. In this rectangle, any arthropod—insects, spiders, and millipedes—was fair game, but I decided to make the quest more challenging by limiting myself to bugs in plain sight; no turning over rocks, no lifting boards, no digging in flower beds.

Although I had lived in Hyde Park for 26 years, that summer was the first time I really saw it. My walks into work in the morning and home in the evening took twice as long as usual. I looked at every tree and flower, wandered alleys I'd barely noticed before, discovered pocket gardens and patches of prairie flowers, and scoured the unkept wild of the Illinois Central right-of-way. Each new image was a new challenge in identification.

By the end of the summer, I'd photographed 124 species of arthropod (and identified about three quarters of them), and had at least double that number of moments when I was stopped in my tracks by the breathtaking beauty that I had walked by, unseeing, for two dozen years.

The richness of nature is not something we usually think of in the context of cities, but little pieces of wilderness surround us, waiting to be seen. I know I recorded only a small fraction of the arthropods in my neighborhood—the nocturnal, the subterranean, and the shy all escaped my notice, and I deliberately avoided the large parks and the lakefront as being too easy a mark. As the summer wore on, some species grew, mated, laid their eggs and disappeared, while others swept through my neighborhood in a week from first appearance to last lonely straggler. Fresh delights appeared literally every day.

Get down on your hands and knees and poke your nose into a patch of weeds. Some might argue that the word "aesthetics" and the word "bug" shouldn't be in the same sentence, but if you can get over your prejudices that the proper number of legs is less than or equal to four and that eyes need to have a pupil, you'll find much to admire here. You might just find a moment of transcendent beauty, ambling along on six legs.

Michael LaBarbera is a professor in the department of organismal biology and anatomy at the University of Chicago and a long-time resident of Hyde Park. He continues to prowl his community, camera in hand, to capture the wilder patches of Chicago.
The richness of nature is not something we usually think of in the context of cities, but little pieces of wilderness surround us, waiting to be seen.
Top, right: The ailanthus webworm moth (Atteva punctella).
Center, right: A yellow-collared scape moth (Cisseps fulvicollis) in the communal garden of the local middle school. Bottom, right: Asian lady beetles (Harmonia axyridis), busily engendering the next generation. This species was repeatedly introduced throughout the last century to control agricultural pests; it now dominates the native species of lady beetles throughout the East and Midwest. It is the only nonnative species of insect shown on these pages. Bottom, left: The caterpillar of an unidentified butterfly or moth, probably a tussock moth, immediately after a light rain. Center, left: A differential grasshopper (Melanoplus differentialis) in an abandoned parking lot.

Ailanthus webworm moth
Differential grasshopper
Unidentified caterpillar
Asian lady beetles
Don and Espie Nelson have a reputation as übervolunteers, according to Michael Redmer of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “They’re two retired folks,” he says, “who don’t want to waste a day in which they could be giving a little back to the world they live in.”

The Nelsons have always been interested in nature and outdoor activities. Their work in restoration started small in the mid-1990s, inspired by guided tours with The Nature Conservancy and a volunteer day at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie near Joliet, Illinois. “We signed up for a workshop on prairie burning,” says Espie. Soon they were donating their labor all over the new preserve and elsewhere, removing invasive plants and learning how to seed native habitats.

When Don retired from his job as a radiochemist at Argonne National Laboratory in 1998, the couple began to devote more time to volunteering. (Espie had retired earlier from work as a computer programmer at Fermilab.) The Nelsons have since become involved with some of the signature natural areas in the region. In addition to their work at Midewin, the two are stewards at Vermont Cemetery Nature Preserve in Wheatland Township, where restoration trailblazers Ray Schulenberg and Bob Betz fought to save original prairie surviving among the gravestones of early settlers. Don serves as a co-steward at Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve, a renowned habitat for extremely rare animal and plant species (see page 20). Regularly monitoring frogs and plants there, the Nelsons identified the rare Fowler’s toad and discovered that cricket frogs had returned to the site. The Nelsons also donate time at The Morton Arboretum’s Schulenberg Prairie, where Ray Schulenberg pioneered the art and science of re-creating prairie habitat.

Don and Espie now assist with most of the controlled burns that the Forest Preserve District of Will County conducts. In 2004, the district recognized Don as Volunteer of the Year for his more than 700 volunteer hours with them. The two estimate that they each spend at least 20 to 30 hours per week on restoration efforts. “I enjoy being out of doors, seeing plants bloom, and collecting seeds,” says Espie, her voice soft but enthusiastic. “It really is like artwork.”

Three years ago, Don and Espie bought a 37-acre farm from Espie’s brothers along the Lily Cache Creek near the Lake Renwick Heron Rookery, about two miles from where they live in Plainfield, Illinois. Ever since, they’ve been working to restore the land to prairie, wetland, and savanna. Nearly a half mile of the creek is now in their care.

Early on, Espie’s brother, John, who once farmed the land, lent a hand by using his farm equipment to keep weeds off the land. With the help of two commercial companies, the Nelsons spread seeds and planted plugs to bring back a healthy mixture of wild plant life.

“We’ve found about 100 native species that were already there,” says Don, “and we’ve added about 100 more.”

Partners for Fish & Wildlife, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program, shares the costs of habitat restoration on the Nelsons’ private land. That’s how the Nelsons began working with Redmer, who coordinates the program in the Chicago region. “Their efforts have surely led to improving conditions for grassland and wetland birds and plants,” says Redmer. On July 14, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will honor the Nelsons with a special event at their Lily Cache Creek property.

The Nelsons look forward to seeing further recovery in the natural areas where they work. Don is especially pleased that the two of them—married since 1970—can share in the excitement. There is warmth in his voice as he says, “Luckily, Espie’s interests and my interests are very similar. We can work together on many things, and that makes it nice.”

—Stephanie Folk
Jill Riddell, the newly appointed and first ever Director of Conservation at the Chicago Academy of Sciences’ Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, recounts an urban nature discovery with her two young girls in front of their Chicago home. The trio found a cicada-killer wasp clinging to a cicada. She explained to the children that the killer wasp fatally stings a cicada, drags it home, and stashes it for its baby to feed on in its larval stage. “It’s thrilling that you can show children all the basic lessons of nature in your own backyard, front lawn, or local park,” she says.

“You can see birth, nesting, adaptation, and more complicated processes like predator-prey relationships and territory disputes. You don’t have to wait to show your children nature until you’re in a place with a beautiful view. You can do that right in the city.”

In 1983, Riddell’s interest in the environment and science led her to volunteer at The Nature Conservancy’s field office in Chicago. Following her graduation from Northwestern University, she began working there, eventually directing fundraising and communications. Her timing was good, as the Conservancy had just begun to build the Volunteer Stewardship Network. From her position at the hub of this network, Riddell met hundreds of stewards at a time when volunteers were establishing themselves as an indispensable part of land management. “I got my ‘street-training’ about prairies and restoration at the Conservancy and developed a deep devotion to Midwest landscapes,” she says. “I love the subtlety of the flat topography, the absence of glamour and the complexity of the plant and animal life in the simplicity of these landscapes.”

After her time at The Nature Conservancy, Riddell worked for the Openlands Project as director of development and communications for three years before becoming an accomplished freelance writer. She has written more than 80 articles and essays about nature in the Chicago region, including several features for Chicago WILDERNESS.

Riddell recently helped write the City of Chicago’s Nature and Wildlife Plan (CW, Spring 2006), which, she says, reflected her desire to have a direct influence on shaping natural resource programs and policy. She also serves as one of the nine members of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. Meeting quarterly, the commissioners review staff recommendations and designate high-quality natural areas as Illinois Nature Preserves, granting perpetual protection from private and public development.

But it is the challenge of helping the Chicago Academy of Sciences return to its roots of doing “serious science” and working in the Nature Museum itself that is her main focus now. “I’m working to help make links between the Nature Museum and what’s happening in the local science and conservation community,” she says. Riddell is also in charge of exhibits, expanding natural science programs for adults, and disseminating information about nature and science to the general public.

“I love being in a workplace filled with the vibrations of children’s voices… it’s a chance to take ideas and make them not just two-dimensional on a page of paper but three-dimensional. And I love working in a job where I can communicate to every Chicagoan who will listen that nature is right outside their door.”

—Gary Mechanic
Butterfly Weed: orange blossom special

In the middle of a summer's day, butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, is easy to find—just follow the butterflies.

True to its name, butterfly weed, also known as butterfly milkweed, is a butterfly magnet. Countless species, as well as ruby-throated hummingbirds and clearwing moths, pay regular visits to this plant. Hikers may see butterflies dancing in a cluster in the distance before discovering that the brilliant, almost fluorescent orange flowers of butterfly weed are the source of all the excitement. The upright flower clusters (called umbels—think "umbrella") offer an irresistible delight to butterflies, which sometimes allow people to sneak within inches as they gorge on nectar.

While butterfly weed nectar feeds the adults of many butterfly species, including hairstreaks (see facing page), the plant has a special relationship with the monarch butterfly. Adult monarchs will lay their eggs only on the leaves of milkweeds, which include butterfly weed and as many as 16 other milkweed species that grow in Chicago Wilderness. As the young larvae emerge from the eggs, they immediately begin to feed. By eating milkweed leaves, the caterpillars ingest a chemical toxin known as cardenolide, a substance distasteful and potentially harmful to birds and other predators. This "deadly diet" provides an effective defense with apparently no negative effect on the caterpillars.

Butterfly weed likes to be "high and dry," growing in elevated prairies, slopes, and uplands. "It's not a common plant to find, but I have seen it most often growing in sandy soil," says naturalist Bob Betz. It can settle onto bluffs, embankments, disturbed roadides, and abandoned sandy fields. But it really proliferates in open, sunny prairies and oak savannas throughout the Chicago Wilderness region.

Out on the prairies, butterfly weed hits its prime in July and into August, alongside grasses such as side oats grama, little bluestem, and big bluestem (before that grass has overpowered *Asclepias' modest two or three feet*). Other signs that you're in the right place are the yellows of compass plant and the purples of tall blazing star and wild bergamot. Butterfly weed flowers disappear by mid-August, replaced by distinctive, slender seedpods. Though the butterflies have mostly gone away, one might consider these pods "child magnets," since kids can't resist teasing out the silky seeds and sending them floating on the wind.

Unlike all other species of milkweed, which release a milky latex sap that has earned them their collective common name, a clear, watery liquid circulates through the leaves of butterfly weed. But an even better way to tell butterfly weed from its cousins is that it's the only milkweed in the Chicago region with those orange flowers. The prominent, non-nonsense orange blooms stand out from the subtler shades of other milkweeds. This makes *Asclepias tuberosa* a popular plant for native gardeners, especially those who want butterfly visitors.

American Indian tribes and pioneer settlers used butterfly weed for centuries as a relief for the pain of pleurisy, an inflammation of the lung. Its herbal name is "pleurisy root." These days, though, eating any part of this plant is considered unwise and dangerous.

On your summer treks through Chicago Wilderness prairies, look out over the tops of the grasses. Perhaps you will catch the sight of butterflies dancing.

—Tom Krischan
Hairstreaks: the delicate dozen

During the longest summer days at Gensburg-Markham Prairie in southern Cook County, shrubby prairie willows peek just above the grasses and flowering forbs. The landscape itself is picturesque, but if the observant naturalist looks closer, she may find something even more majestic flitting amongst the thistle and butterfly weed.

Acadian hairstreaks (Satyrium aca-dica) call this south-suburban prairie home every summer. These ghostly gray butterflies sport a row of submarginal orange spots and an orange cap over the blue spot on the hindwing. Their adolescent lives begin in April, when bright green caterpillars emerge from eggs that have survived the previous summer, fall, and winter on prairie willow twigs. The hungry youngsters then spend a month and a half munching on the nutritious willow leaves before they retire to a chrysalis and await to emerge as adult butterflies. Unlike monarchs, these butterflies don’t have hanging chrysalises but pupate flat against surfaces.

When the adult Acadian hairstreaks emerge in late June and July, they have two or three exciting weeks of eating and breeding ahead of them. With wings spanning all of one inch, they collect nectar until they lay eggs in late July. Since Acadians spawn only one new generation each year, this is the only time they can be seen. Hairstreaks stay generally rooted to one place all year, restricting themselves to localized colonies even more than many other non-migratory butterflies.

This life cycle is typical of members of the hairstreak subfamily, 12 species of which can be found in the Chicago Wilderness region. Most of these species are only subtly different from one another in appearance, characterized by streaks of color—usually orange and blue—on the underside of their gray or brown wings, and short, hair-thin tails protruding from the wings’ trailing edges.

Yet, despite these similarities, the tastes and habitats of native hairstreaks can be as different as night and day. Doug Taron, curator of biology at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, explains that many hairstreaks spend their lives completely separated from other hairstreak species. “Each species has its own habitat,” he says, “but the group is going to be all over the place.”

For example, while the hickory hairstreak likes to spend its time around deciduous forest trees, coral hairstreaks like to feed on butterfly weed in prairies and shrublands (for more on butterfly weed, see facing page).

And while the banded and the Edwards’ hairstreaks both frequent oak savannas, the banded hairstreak tolerates more degraded places, even suburban landscapes, as long as oak trees are present. Butterfly monitors find the Edwards’ much less frequently. “They require a healthier savanna,” Taron says of the finicky Edwards’, “but exactly how they’re more picky or why they’re more picky, we don’t know.” You may find the Edwards’ in areas where a diverse plant community grows in the bright, patchy sunlight beneath widely spaced oaks.

Though the Edwards’ is a more conservative species, none of the Illinois hairstreaks are seriously threatened. While some native species seem rare in our area—the white hairstreak, for instance—Taron explains that this is only because we are on the edges of their ranges. Partly because of data collected by volunteer butterfly monitors over the past two decades, he’s confident that no species have disappeared from our region.

Yet, to maintain this healthy multiplicity of native hairstreaks, Chicago Wilderness must continue to offer a wide variety of suitable habitats. Since this group of butterflies is a diversely particular group, the region must retain its wetlands, prairies, woodlands, and savannas for each species to continue to flourish.

—Tegan Jones

To become a volunteer butterfly monitor, call (847) 464-4426 or visit bfly.org.
Overflow Owl Prowl  By Tim Kuesel

What would you do if you threw an event and people descended on you like an avalanche? On Friday, March 3, The Chicago Sun-Times ran a little article touting the owl-finding skills of Wannetta Elliott, a retired mail carrier from Oak Forest. It invited readers to show up for a tour she was leading the next day.
Wannetta (pronounced like “Juanita”) loves owls and loves to teach people to love them. She’d been giving her little tour for Thorn Creek Audubon Society for many years, and six or ten people would show. That was as many as she could handle. Wannetta doesn’t like crowds, to put it mildly.

At 7:50 the next morning I was there a bit early, at the small strip mall at the corner of Vollmer Road and Central Avenue in Matteson, Illinois. So were 142 people in 68 cars, by my count. I quickly realized this was a happening and started taking notes.

Wannetta had been out early visiting her spots to make sure of that morning’s owl perch locations. When she approached the meeting point for the tour on Vollmer, she was confused, then terrified by the throng of people filling the sidewalks, their cars overflowing the parking lot. Local police, responding to a call from the White Hen Pantry (which wanted to save parking spots for its coffee customers), were trying to redirect people to a dirt road across Central.

“I just wanted to jump back in my car and run away,” Wannetta said to a reporter later.

But seeing that the assemblage consisted largely of families with young children and new enthusiasts lured by the publicity from the newspaper, Wannetta bucked up her courage and started making plans. She divided people into small groups and explained that the Rare long-eared owl was a skittish little creature that could be approached only by a few quiet people at a time. She set up a couple of viewing scopes in the pine grove across the street and trained them on a long-eared owl. Then she led people out in small groups, and made sure all enjoyed good looks at a miraculously cooperative bird. A bit later, she took the tour participants to see great horned owls sitting on nests in several locations.

People were entranced by this great opportunity. One experienced birder commented that even after viewing the owls Wannetta had set up in her scope, and knowing exactly where to look with binoculars, the birds’ camouflage was so concealing that she was unable to locate a single owl on her own. No wonder people call Wannetta “the owl lady.” I suspect many more budding birders are now hooked. Chicago Wilderness just got a little bigger.

**OWLS IN CHICAGO WILDERNESS**

Eight species of owl are known to at least pass through Chicago Wilderness. Our woodland owls include the long-eared, screech, barred, great horned, and saw-whet owls. Owl species of the grasslands are the short-eared owl and (very rarely) the barn owl. Most winters, the snowy owl makes an appearance along the lakefront.

**Looking for Owls**

First, visit the right habitat. Long-eared owls, says our guide Wannetta, prefer pines or thickets beside a large field. Great horned owls can nest fairly deep in the woods, but also need an open hunting ground nearby. Once you find the habitat, hike in and look for whitewashed pellets at the base of trees. This will signal a place where owls have roosted. But even once you’re there, owls can blend right into the background. The experts use a few tricks to see the owls. Long-eareds, for instance, roost all day long, having finished their hunting by early morning. Wannetta’s instructions: Be quiet, walk slowly, and look. It will take practice. “I’m terrible at looking for morels,” she notes. “I don’t do it too often.”

**Owl Habits**

Great horned owls are one of the few predators for skunks. (Thanks, guys!!) They will also prey upon long-eared owls, which in turn might prey upon smaller saw-whet owls, as well as numerous small mammals, mostly mice and voles.

**Owl in a Basket**

Wannetta had seen a great horned owl trying unsuccessfully to nest in an Osage orange tree. So one year she placed a bushel basket about 20 feet up in the tree. The same great horned owl has nested in the basket for the last 10 years.

**Owl Proverb**

A wise old owl sat in an oak,
the more he saw the less he spoke,
the less he spoke the more he heard,
why can’t we all be like that wise old bird?

—Anonymous

Tim Kuesel describes himself as “a jovial birder and canoeist and hiker and wildlife watcher and outdoorsy guy who just gets his jollies from recognizing whimsical things that tickle me and then sharing them.” He lives in Brookfield, Illinois. This article is adapted from a message he sent to the Illinois Birders Exchanging Thoughts (IBET) listserv. To sign up for the listserv, go to bcbirds.org/hotline/IBET.html.
1 Advocates Oppose Indiana Dunes Hotel

A plan to build a hotel and convention center on the shoreline inside Indiana Dunes State Park, in northwest Indiana, is pitting the state against a variety of environmental organizations.

The proposed hotel is part of a plan to bring lodging to those Indiana state parks where there are few nearby overnight facilities. The conceptual plan for the Dunes is for a 100-room hotel and conference center, with a swimming pool and 200-car parking lot. It will be situated on the footprint of an old, small hotel built in the 1930s and will be just southwest, and in view of, the dune known as Mount Tom and an existing pavilion. Indiana Dunes State Park has 2,182 acres, 1,530 of which have heightened protection as a nature preserve.

Supporting the development are Governor Mitch Daniels, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, some area innkeepers, the Northwest Indiana Forum, and the Lake County Tourism Board. Lined up against the proposal are a number of environmental groups, including the 53-year-old Save the Dunes Council. The Porter County Recreation and Visitor Commission supports the concept of a hotel inside the park, but not on the shoreline. Estimates suggest the proposed hotel will be within a few hundred feet of the water's edge.

Currently, the park has only campsites. The position of the state is that the hotel complex will bring in visitors year round, as well as an innkeeper’s tax for use of public land.

More significantly, the state maintains that the site is already disturbed and that an environmental impact study is neither needed nor required, as no federal money will be utilized for the project. The Indiana Natural Resources Commission must approve the plan, however.

Opponents contest the state's assertions. Susan Mihlo, President of Save the Dunes, says that there has been so little thought put into the project and so few restrictions made that “the candy store is open.” She says that although a lodge may be justified for parks that have no facilities nearby, there are numerous facilities near the Dunes. And she states that the state should not be permitting a private company to be making money on public land.

However, most troubling to her and other groups is the lack of an environmental study, the lack of mandatory LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for the proposed structure, as well as the sheer physical impact of a facility this size intruding on the lakeshore landscape. She also says there is no requirement for controlling water runoff and that the facility could threaten birds and the 1,400 species of vascular plants for which the Dunes provide vital habitat.

There is also some concern that a hotel would violate the new Marquette Greenway Plan, which was developed to protect the Indiana shoreline.

The Dunes, says Mihlo, are “part of the largest system of freshwater dunes in the world. This park should be showcased proudly based on that merit alone, not as a hotel destination.”

Proposals from developers were due May 21. To contact Save the Dunes Council, (219) 879-3937 or savedunes.org.

—Elizabeth Riotto

2 Birders Find Swainson’s Hawks

This spring, the Swainson’s Hawk Project began its first field season. Volunteer teams are combing 35 study sections of 25 square miles each in the northwest sector of Chicago Wilderness. The effort has yielded tired arms, stiff necks—and sightings in eight of the study areas. Four pairs of this state-endangered species have been located, and the field-workers continue to search for others.

Birders have found that at least some of these hawks have moved to new ground (their former territories are threatened by development), but don’t know whether they’ll be able to breed there.

For information, visit bcbirds.org/shp.

—Judy Pollock

3 Attempted Raid on Open Space Funds Foiled Again

This spring, the State of Illinois made yet another attempt to raid money from dedicated open space funds. This year, the threat was to take $25 million from the Open Space Land Acquisition and Development Fund (OSLAD) and the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF). Thanks to an outpouring of support for these programs, $20 million was preserved, while the new appropriation was increased by $13 million over last year’s levels.

One of the top environmental issues the Illinois General Assembly addressed this year was mercury contamination. In January, Governor Blagojevich proposed rules that would require coal plants to reduce their mercury emissions by 90 percent. For the past three years, legislators and advocates have been working to require the removal of switches that contained mercury from vehicles before they are scrapped, with auto manufacturers paying for the cost of the program. This year the Mercury Switch Recovery Act passed and was signed by the governor.
on Earth Day. Another bill also passed, urging retail stores selling fresh fish in Illinois to post a notice about the dangers of mercury.

Pollution from diesel engines will be curbed as a result of a bill that will require stationary diesel vehicles, such as school buses, to limit the amount of time they spend idling their engines. Diesel vehicles in the Chicago and Metro East areas will have to limit idling to 10 minutes per hour.

Also of note: For the first time, Illinois has a legislative Environmental Caucus. In February, a group of pro-environmental legislators announced the creation of a bipartisan and bicameral caucus with about 25 founding members. The co-chairs are Representatives Karen May and Dave Winters and Senators Pam Althoff and Mattie Hunter. The caucus will discuss issues and legislation, seek to take caucus positions on individual bills, and establish priorities on legislation.

**Annual Burn Totals Benefit from Dry Spring**

An early, dry spring combined with last year’s drought-like conditions fueled a burn season that surpassed expectations. Forest Preserve Districts successfully burned more than 7,000 acres at 110 preserves in an ongoing effort to enhance the health and beauty of these natural areas.

At many preserves, more than one area was burned. In DuPage County, for example, 67 smaller burns were staged at 21 preserves to accommodate windy conditions. Chicago Wilderness woodlands are usually damp during both spring and fall burn seasons, but they were dry enough this spring to carry a fire that eliminated the built-up thatch.

The Chicago Park District (CPD) burned 77 acres at 20 sites. The CPD has been safely conducting controlled burns at natural sites for more than a decade. Weedy species such as thistle and sweet clover pose a big challenge, and fire has proven to be the most cost-effective way to eradicate them. Each park site has weather requirements specific to its urban location. With so many dry days this spring, the CPD was able to burn every site on its list.

At Burnham Nature Sanctuary, an established prairie burned well as did a new prairie. “That will go a long way to manage the weeds and let the newer prairie plantings get a foothold,” said Angela Sturdevant, CPD natural areas manager.

<table>
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<th>Agency</th>
<th>Acres Burned</th>
<th>% of Natural Acres Held</th>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>DuPage FPD</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kane FPD</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendall FPD</td>
<td>225</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lake FPD</td>
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<tr>
<td>McHenry CD</td>
<td>2,113</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will FPD</td>
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Acreage totals based on the Fall ’05 and Spring ’06 burn season reports.
Whooping Cranes Endorse Habitat

This April, Chicago Wilderness served as bed-and-breakfast for not one or two but 14 whooping cranes traveling together from the Chassahowitzka Wildlife Refuge in Florida to their breeding grounds in the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, located in the Great Central Wisconsin Swamp.

The cranes stopped at East Branch Forest Preserve near Glendale Heights in north-central DuPage County. They headed north again a few days later, but when they met up with strong winds out of the north, they sought refuge in Lost Valley Marsh, part of Glacial Park in McHenry County.

Both East Branch (managed by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County) and Glacial Park (managed by the McHenry County Conservation District, or MCCD) have received restoration attention from land managers.

“The arrival of the whooping cranes... is the fulfillment of a promise the district made in 1994 when it began its program of wetland restoration,” said MCCD natural resources manager Ed Collins. The marsh where the cranes nested owes its existence to a successful 70-acre habitat restoration project completed by the district in the 1990s.

Most times a whooping crane lands along its migration route, it’s an endorsement of the habitat. Congratulations to all who were “whooped.”

— Don Parker

Wolf Road Prairie Still On Ropes

The Westchester Village Board voted 4 to 2 on March 14 to approve a housing development next to Wolf Road Prairie, despite action by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County two weeks earlier to preclude building the access road that the development needs to go forward. With the two governmental bodies in disagreement about whether the road can be built, the question is likely to be decided in court.

The Patric Greene Development Group wants to put 26 home sites on 10 acres of land that buffers 80-acre Wolf Road Prairie. Twelve miles from downtown Chicago, the prairie is recognized as the finest and largest sil-loam prairie east of the Mississippi. The buffer plot in question is immediately uphill of the prairie, a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, and currently has only two houses on 5-acre lots. Environmental experts are concerned that the proposed development would disrupt hydrology in the prairie and would open the preserve to other ecological threats. Among the opponents of the project are the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC), and Save the Prairie Society. These three entities own the prairie and much of the buffer land.

On March 2, the Cook County's Board of Commissioners unanimously approved an ordinance “vacating” the streets and alleys in their holdings at Wolf Road Prairie. President Stroger signed the ordinance just one day before suffering a serious stroke. FPDCC believes the ordinance prevents construction of a platted road from Constitution Drive through the prairie to the home sites. “Throughout President Stroger’s career, he has continued, with the support of the board of commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, to protect the beauty of Wolf Road Prairie,” said Pamela Munizzi, special assistant to the president. “While we in no way want to stifle the economic growth of Westchester, our mission is to protect our holdings.”

The Village of Westchester, relying on a title report, contends that FPDCC does not own the roadway, which was platted in 1925 but never built.

Greene’s project faces several additional hurdles. The developer has requested that the Army Corps of Engineers issue a “letter of no objection” to the project. The Corps has replied that it must first assess wetland boundaries, which it cannot start until early June 2006. Also, the village and the Illinois Nature Preserve Commission are required by law to consult on whether the project would be likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of the natural area. But if the road cannot be built, these additional reviews may be moot.

— Barbara Hill
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7 Activists Consoled with Corner of Terry Prairie
Volunteers conducted a plant rescue at one of the largest unprotected calcareous wet prairies in this region—a site called Terry Prairie in Bridgeview, Illinois—because most of the site, located across from the courthouse on 76th Street, will soon become a residential development. The owner, Concord Homes, has pledged to protect 8 to 10 acres in the northwest corner of the 36-acre site. But activists are dismayed that the Army Corps of Engineers issued a permit in late April allowing the developer to fill in precious wetlands. “The unique hydrology of this site demonstrates the problem with wetland delineation as currently practiced,” said Doug Chien of the Sierra Club.

8 Chicago Announces Environmental Agenda, C3
During an Earth Week event at a windy, sunny Daley Plaza, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley announced an ambitious Environmental Action Agenda for 2006. The Agenda focused on sustainability issues, and included committing the city to building all its new buildings at a minimum LEED Silver level, retrofitting its 105 fire stations for energy efficiency, and using 100 percent recycled materials in residential street construction. It also advocates continued conservation work on the Chicago River and preservation of more than 350 acres in the Calumet region. Visit cityofchicago.org/environment to download the agenda.

The City also announced the creation of the Chicago Conservation Corps, or “C3,” a program to harness the energies of volunteers across the city in projects that include removing invasive species from natural areas and restoring the Chicago River and Lake Michigan. “We see C3 growing into an enthusiastic grassroots network of hundreds of volunteer leaders from all of Chicago’s 77 neighborhoods who will lead thousands of their neighbors in projects to enhance their neighborhood environments,” said environment commissioner Sadhu Johnston. “As a result of these projects, tens of thousands of Chicagoans will begin bringing simple actions into their everyday lives that help to clean the air, care for thousands of acres of open space, save millions of gallons of water, and make affordable and renewable energy available to all.” To learn more about participating in C3, call (312) 743-9283, or visit cityofchicago.org/environment/C3.

9 Asian Carp Barrier Needs More Juice
Thanks to Illinois Senator Barack Obama and Ohio Senator George Voinovich, $400,000 was included in a recent emergency spending bill to
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prevent the shutdown of an electric barrier intended to keep Asian carp out of the Great Lakes. Without these additional funds, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which built and operates two barriers strung along the bottom of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, would run out of money by late May.

As of press time, President Bush was threatening to veto the spending bill, most of which would pay for the war in Iraq and Gulf Coast hurricane relief.

Biologists worry that Asian carp could rob Lake Michigan's popular sporting fish of their food supply.

—Debra Shore

10 Buy Land Now
That's the conclusion of a new report issued in May by the Openlands Project, the result of a two-year study of forest preserve and conservation districts in northeastern Illinois. (Visit www.openlands.org/resources.asp for the full report and summary.)

While acknowledging that the 170,000 acres of preserved lands owned by county forest preserve and conservation districts are critical for protection of biodiversity, public education, and recreation, the report stressed that land acquisition must be the top priority, especially in counties facing explosive growth. The report also said that agencies must seek increases in state and federal funding; must ward off encroachments and decline to sell land; and must educate and inform people about the need for successful restoration of natural lands.

11 Chicago Wilderness Welcomes Eight New Members
In March, the Chicago Wilderness coalition admitted eight new organizations. It now stands at 193 members.

The Northminster Presbyterian Church in Evanston (northminster.org) practices responsible stewardship of the earth. Church members are restoring an area along the Chicago River.

Dedicated to education and environmental research, Benedictine University in Lisle (ben.edu) is developing a Master of Science in Science Teaching.

Improving environmental quality while promoting community and economic development is the mission of the Delta Institute (delta-institute.org).

Two park districts remain undeterred by the small size of their parks and green spaces. The Park District of Franklin Park sends a big message with a series of native plant demonstrations and education sites (fparks.org), while the Ridgeville Park District in Evanston cares for critical open space and community gardens (ridgeville.org).

Both the Illinois and Indiana Divisions of the Izaak Walton League of America (izwa.org) work to protect and conserve the natural resources of our region, including work on the Grand Kankakee Marsh Wildlife Refuge.

Providing a medium for artistic expression by women about nature, Seeding the Snow (seedingsnow.net) is a cultural journal that fosters connections to our Midwestern landscape.

—Michelle Uting
Researchers Seek Gray Fox

Though gray foxes once populated much of northeastern Illinois, biologists are concerned that the species has become scarce. A study in Cook, DuPage, McHenry, and Lake Counties seeks to learn more about the foxes’ distribution, and identify key factors contributing to their decline.

The Ohio State University—with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County—is asking the public to report sightings.

“Local residents help us tremendously,” says Alison Willingham of Ohio State.

“Our fieldwork is primarily conducted on public property, but residents can report what they see on their private land. This is especially valuable because gray foxes tend to be generalists. They don’t always stick to heavily wooded habitats and are often found in urbanized areas.”

Typically weighing less than 12 pounds, gray foxes have a grizzled gray coloration and rusty-red fur on their ears, neck, legs, and flanks. Not to be mistaken for red foxes, the grays have white paws and bushy tails tipped in black. They are the only member of the canine family that climb trees, and they are most active in the evening.

The public can report sightings to illinoisgrayfox@yahoo.com, or call (847) 428-6331, ext. 3. Provide contact information and the time, date, and location of the sighting.

Biologists have been radio-tagging small populations of gray foxes in southeastern Cook County, McHenry County, and an area south of Chicago. Ultimately, the data may help determine the levels of urbanization that gray foxes can tolerate. Researchers also hope to learn how coyote populations compete for habitat with foxes.

—Divina Baratta


Carl Nels Becker, a dedicated advocate for Illinois conservation, died on April 13 at the age of 56, of a heart attack. At the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Chicago Wilderness consortium at The Field Museum, chair John Rogner acknowledged Becker’s formative presence at the first meetings back in the mid-1990s—“when Chicago Wilderness could fit around a small table.”

Becker, who lived in Petersburg, Illinois, worked most of his career at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, where he was the first executive director of the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board and the first chief of the Division of Natural Heritage. He spearheaded the Wildlife Preservation Fund, which allows taxpayers to check a box on their income taxes to support wildlife, and worked to pass legislation allocating a portion of the Real Estate Transfer Tax to conservation. On the national level, he served as president of the Natural Areas Association.

A lifelong birder, Becker helped establish the peregrine falcon breeding program in Chicago. He most recently worked as director of conservation programs for the The Nature Conservancy in Illinois.

14 Thanks to Ray Klebb

From 2001 to 2006, Ray Klebb donated his efforts to Chicago WILDERNESS magazine, delivering magazines to garden shops, bookstores, and nature centers on Chicago’s North Side. A realtor, passionate fisherman, and devoted Christian caregiver, Ray and his wife new plan to spend more time with their grandchildren. Ray’s efforts, and those of many other volunteers, have made this magazine what it is today.
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Black and Light

If you were a buck, wouldn't you just love this sleek doe, her wet black nose, those ears so delicate the morning sun shines through them?

If you were a botanist, you'd probably focus on the ancient prairie in the foreground. Rattlesnake master, lead plant, and the wide leaves of prairie dock. Weedier and ranker, big bluestem grass and tall coreopsis show up nearer the edge, where the brush and trees have been cut back.

But look at this scene through the eyes of a conservationist. It's amazing that such complexity as is here can also show so much black and white.

The bottom of the photo is predominantly white from the sparkle of the dew. The top is mostly black, because neither the camera nor your eye can see much there—in the dense shade of the plague of shrubs and trees that have invaded this original prairie.

A natural forest wouldn't look like that. In this case we have a few species of invasive trees but none of the native shrubs, wildflowers, grasses, birds, or butterflies of an open, light-filled, natural forest. The black that the camera sees is truly representative of what the ecologist finds.

Some people would call the black background here a "forest" and complain if it were cut down. I appreciate their feelings. But increasing numbers of people see the pushing back of these invasive species as a small loss for a great gain. People who care for nature are becoming more and more informed, by taking field classes, helping with habitat restoration, and reading about how ecology works. They want to be part of the work to expand the edges of our pathetically few ancient prairies, savannas, and oak woodlands. They want to see beyond black and white—to a world of colors, and wondrous complexity.

Photo by Carol Freeman. Somme Prairie Grove is protected and managed by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Much of the brush clearing is done by the intrepid volunteers of the North Branch Restoration Project. Words by Stephen Packard.
If at first you do succeed try, try again.

At The Nature Conservancy, we are proud to be a founding member and active participant in nurturing the growth of Chicago Wilderness. Now more than 190 members strong, Chicago Wilderness represents a model of collaboration that has contributed significantly to protecting and restoring natural areas throughout the region. That enriches the quality of all of our lives.

Congratulations on a decade of conservation accomplishments. We look forward to growing with you!

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