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chicagowilderness.org/2021_EERP_Award_Winners

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CHICAGO WILDERNESS HONORS EXCELLENCE IN ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Event on December 8 recognizes four organizations for outstanding rehabilitation of natural areas that are essential for wildlife and human well-being

CHICAGO, IL (19 November 2021) – The prairies, wetlands, dunes, marshes, and savannas of the Midwest have endured decades of alteration and change. But a committed community of land managers, ecologists, wildlife biologists, and others make it their mission to restore these places so plants and animals can thrive and people can enjoy their benefits.

At an event on December 8, Chicago Wilderness will recognize a select few organizations for the high standard they have set for natural resource management, and honors them with the prestigious Excellence in Ecological Restoration site accreditation awards.

The 2021 accredited sites are:

- Forest Preserves of Cook County, for restoration efforts at Cranberry Slough Nature Preserve (Platinum Award)
- McHenry County Conservation District, for restoration efforts at Glacial Park (Platinum Award)
- Lake County Forest Preserve District, for restoration efforts at Pine Dunes East (Platinum Award)
- Forest Preserve District of Will County, for restoration efforts at Braidwood Dunes Savanna and Nature Preserve (Gold Award)

“The four recipients are the best of the best in terms of their ability to manage an ecosystem so it is healthy, vibrant, and flourishing,” said Ralph Schultz, executive director of the Forest Preserve District of Will County and co-chair of the Chicago Wilderness Commission on Excellence in Ecological Restoration. “With land protection, acquiring a piece of property is just the first step in a long-term commitment to its care. The hard work falls to the staff and volunteers who manage the property, and we are thrilled to shine a spotlight on them.”

“The Excellence in Ecological Restoration Site Accreditation Program demonstrates the highest standards and best management practices in terms of ecological restoration and managing healthy landscapes,” said Elizabeth Kessler, executive director of the McHenry County Conservation District and chair for Chicago Wilderness. “The process includes a formal application, a self-assessment, and a site visit by a team of conservation professionals in order to be granted this distinguished accreditation. Each of our recipients had to show evidence in meeting the highest of standards and should be extremely proud of their work. All of us in the four-state Chicago Wilderness region benefit from their knowledge and from the hard, physical work they put into ecological restoration.”

Chicago Wilderness is an alliance of more than 200 organizations in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The Excellence in Ecological Restoration Awards will be given out at an in-person celebration at Thatcher Woods Event Pavilion in River Forest on December 8, along with Chicago Wilderness Force of Nature Awards, which are bestowed on individuals for their impressive contributions to conservation.

2021 Chicago Wilderness Excellence in Ecological Restoration Award Winners

The Excellence in Ecological Restoration Awards were launched in 2012 and are granted every two years by a volunteer commission that uses a rigorous, standards-based approach to review applications and conduct site visits. To maintain its Excellence in Ecological Restoration accreditation, a site must reapply every five years.

Platinum Award: Cranberry Slough Nature Preserve, Forest Preserves of Cook County

Cranberry Slough Nature Preserve is a 380-acre state-dedicated nature preserve that lies within the largest contiguous tract of Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC) holdings. The site includes remnant woodland, savanna, prairie, sedge meadow, and marsh natural communities. Restoration began at Cranberry Slough nearly 40 years ago, mainly led by volunteer stewards. In 2015 the Forest Preserves initiated a major restoration project, connecting the higher quality and previously restored portions of the preserve. In 2018, FPCC completed a stream restoration project along a reach of Crooked Creek that flows through the nature preserve. From 2019-2021 selective tree removal has occurred across 56 targeted acres of the preserve.

Platinum Award: Glacial Park, McHenry County Conservation District

Glacial Park is the McHenry County Conservation District's (MCCD) most popular site, visited annually by more than 64,000 guests. The 3,500-acre park contains many spectacular glacial features, including kames, kettles, and rolling glacial moraine. Plant communities include a sphagnum bog and many marshes, fens, prairies, and remnant oak savannas. In the 1990s, resource management staff began extensive hydrological restoration, culminating in re-meandering and bank grading on 3.5 miles of Nippersink Creek. More recently, the MCCD worked with the Army Corps to repair stream banks and install riffles on an additional 3.5 miles of stream.

Platinum Award: Pine Dunes East, Lake County Forest Preserve District

The 316-acre site is buffered by the remaining 639 acres of Pine Dunes Forest Preserve and nearly 2,500 acres of other Forest Preserve sites nearby. The entire site has been restored and under active management since 2013. Climate change has the potential to impact this and all sites in the region. The District is an active participant in Chicago Wilderness and other climate workgroups and has initiated a climate-adapted seeding study at another site to investigate the potential future use of more southern seed sources at restoration sites.

Gold Award: Braidwood Dunes Savanna and Nature Preserve, Forest Preserve District of Will County

Land acquisition began in 1980 and Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve (BDN) now covers 315 acres, providing valuable habitat for seventeen state listed species. The entirety of BDN is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve and is also an Illinois Natural Area Inventory Site. Recent prescribed fire and overseeding promote recovery from past impacts; overseeding could only be started after woody thinning. Wind erosion was a greater threat to BDN than water erosion, but formerly plowed dunes are now stabilized. The Nature Conservancy cooperatively provides rare and hard-to-find native seed in exchange for labor.