

Chicago Wilderness

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Chicago Wilderness Announces 2019 Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program Recipients

On November 14, the Chicago Wilderness alliance will award four new sites its Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program accreditation at a ceremony at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, IL.

Launched in 2012, the Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program (EERP) recognizes the organizations managing the largest and highest-quality natural areas in the Chicago region and beyond. Using a rigorous, standards-based approach, the program highlights projects that set an example of best practices in natural resource management and ecological restoration.

“Many people think you can buy a parcel of land, put a fence around it, and it’s preserved,” said Elizabeth Kessler, Executive Director of the McHenry County Conservation District and Chair for Chicago Wilderness. “In reality, that land often has had years of use that may not be consistent with best management practices for land preservation. It takes decades of dedication to bring most preserves back to optimal health, and vigilance to keep them that way.”

“This program stimulates discussion — what’s working, what’s not, what are the most innovative land managers doing,” said Ralph Schultz, Chief Operating Officer of the Forest Preserve District of Will County and Co-Chair of the Chicago Wilderness Commission on Excellence in Ecological Restoration. “EERP looks at the whole picture. Agencies are evaluated not only on common practices such as invasive species control, but also questions like: How does a preserve work with adjoining lands? How are managers addressing topographical challenges such as channelized streams, drain tiles, and runoff from neighboring properties? What about shifting conditions such as climate change?”

Landowners can submit up to two applications every two years. The seven-to-nine-person Chicago Wilderness Commission on Ecological Restoration selects recipients using a point system and verification by site visits. To maintain accreditation, a site must reapply every five years.

Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance of more than 250 members including public land-owning agencies, nonprofits, community-based organizations, educational institutions, government agencies, businesses, and volunteer-based groups. We work collaboratively to build and implement a regional plan for preserving and restoring nature that improves environmental health, promotes quality of life, and benefits our vibrant communities.

To learn more, visit chicagowilderness.org. See next page for 2019 accreditation recipients.

2019 Chicago Wilderness Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program Accreditations

PLATINUM ACCREDITATION

Deer Grove West Wetland and Woodland Nature Preserve Forest Preserves of Cook County

Rich remnant oak woodlands form the core of Deer Grove West Woodland and Wetland Nature Preserve in northwest Cook County. Numerous small wetlands dot the rolling, rugged terrain, and a tributary to Salt Creek runs through the preserve's center. Biologists have recorded more than 300 plant species, including 6 state-listed species. The Forest Preserves of Cook County has built upon 20 years of volunteer stewardship here with regular prescribed burns, protection of delicate ravines from mountain biking, and ambitious hydrologic repairs funded by the O'Hare Modernization Mitigation Account.

PLATINUM ACCREDITATION

Fermilab US Department of Energy

On the grounds of one of the world's leading particle physics labs is one of the world's groundbreaking experiments in ecological restoration. Beginning in 1975, Fermilab crews, led by Dr. Robert Betz, used agricultural equipment to plant prairie on a vast scale. Today, staff and volunteers manage 1,000 acres of recreated tallgrass prairie connecting several hundred acres of remnant woodlands and wetlands. Shrublands, old-field grasslands, and sedge meadows add to the matrix. Whether through burning, mowing, or row crops, nearly all of the site's 6,800 acres is managed in some way, much of it to maximize habitat value.

PLATINUM ACCREDITATION

Springbrook Prairie Forest Preserve Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

Once row crops and a sod farm, the 1,829-acre Springbrook Prairie Forest Preserve in Naperville is now better known for its regionally significant grassland and wetland bird populations. DuPage County's highest-rated stream, Springbrook Creek, runs through the preserve. The District has returned the creek to its natural channel and floodplain, restored significant wetlands, and sought to improve habitat through creative partnerships such as the Regal Fritillary Habitat Creation Project. To protect the integrity of its highest quality natural areas, the District closed a road through the site and pushed most trails to the site's exterior.

SILVER ACCREDITATION

Hadley Valley Preserve Forest Preserve District of Will County

A key link in the greenway along Spring Creek near Joliet, the majority of Hadley Valley's 700 acres has received intensive management over the past 12 years. The District remeandered nearly three miles of Spring Creek and disabled eight miles of drain tiles to restore more than 150 acres of wetlands. Through prescribed burns and invasive species removal, it has brought back more than 450 acres of prairie and is working to increase the diversity of native species.

For more on the Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program, visit chicagowilderness.org/page/EERP.

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