
**Preserving what is left.....**

Fortunately, a few native prairies have been permanently protected as Illinois Nature Preserves. But there are many scattered bits of prairie around the state on private land which remain vulnerable to destruction. Even small prairie remnants should be preserved, and can serve as valuable sources of seed for restoration projects. Hill prairies which have been overrun with woody plants can be cleared and burned, thus allowing the prairie plants to dominate once again. If you know of prairie remnants which are not yet preserved, please share this brochure with the property owners, so that they can contact the IDNR Heritage Biologist in the immediate area. In this way, you can play a part in preserving the special ecosystem which gave Illinois its designation as "the Prairie State."

*Artwork by Gary Wilford*

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# A Prairie Primer

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**Only a little remains.....**

When the first settlers came to Illinois, more than 21 million acres of tallgrass prairie covered the landscape. The colorful grasslands often stretched unbroken for miles, and were described by early travelers as a vast sea of waving grasses dotted with colorful flowers. Today, less than 1/10 of one per cent of the original Illinois prairie remains. The rest has been replaced by cropland, cities, industrial development and highways.

**What is a prairie?**

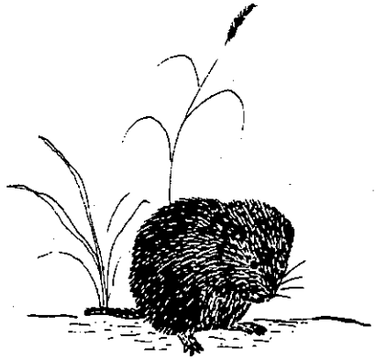
A prairie is a complex ecosystem built upon deep-rooted grasses and forbs which are adapted to the dry, hot summers typical of Illinois. More than 300 species of plants grow in prairies, but a handful of grasses are dominant. Compass-plant, purple coneflower, and prairie clover are common forbs. Many small prairie remnants have only a few species remaining of their once-rich diversity. What is left has survived years of disturbance by grazing or encroaching weeds.

**Not all prairies are alike.....**

Prairies differ in species composition due to moisture and the types of soil in which they grow. They are usually classified as wet, mesic, or dry. Wet prairies, also called swales, are poorly drained with deep clay silt loam soils. Switchgrass and swamp milkweed typically grow in these areas. Mesic prairies, with well-drained, medium silt or sandy loam soils, are rich in diversity. They are characterized by big bluestem, Indian grass, prairie dock, compass-plant, prairie coneflower, and many other plants. Dry prairies tend to be found in sandy soils or on steep southwest-facing slopes, where they are known as hill prairies. Typical plants include little bluestem, sideoats grama, and pale purple coneflower. The latter also grow in mesic prairies, where they attain much greater heights.

**A prairie kaleidoscope.....**

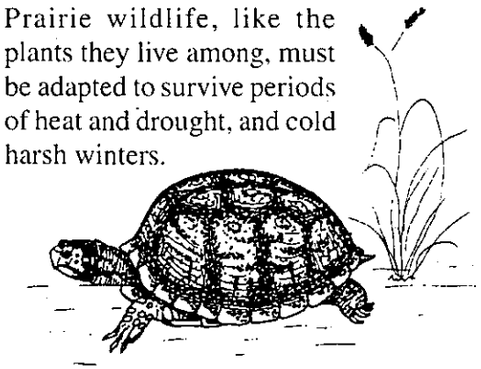
The prairie landscape changes throughout the growing season, as an endless parade of colorful wildflowers make their appearance. In early spring, when grasses have just begun to grow, the flowers tend to be low to the ground, such as violets, puccoon, toadflax, Indian paintbrush, and cream indigo. Early summer brings purple coneflowers, false white indigo, pale lobelia, and wild quinine. Later in summer, the grasses and forbs grow taller, and the prairie is dotted with blazing stars and silphiums. Autumn is the season for asters and prairie gentians, and it is now that the tall grasses finally bare their pollen to the winds



**Prairie wildlife is adaptable....**

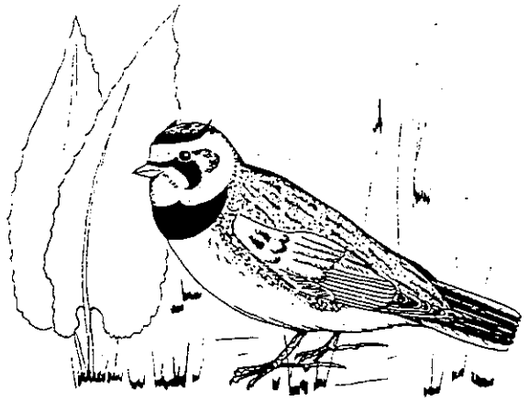
The original prairie was home to a myriad of animal life, from tiny insects and spiders to the massive bison. Many of these are now gone from the Illinois landscape, and others are greatly endangered—hanging on in a few scattered locations, with populations often widely separated. Several species of colorful butterflies are attracted to prairie wildflowers, and the air literally hums with the activity of bees, dragonflies, and other insects. Deer mice, prairie voles, ground squirrels, and other small mammals live in these grasslands, doing their part to keep a balance in this delicate ecosystem. Several varieties of snakes also inhabit the prairie, and the wetter swales are home to tiger salamanders, toads, and turtles.

Prairie wildlife, like the plants they live among, must be adapted to survive periods of heat and drought, and cold harsh winters.



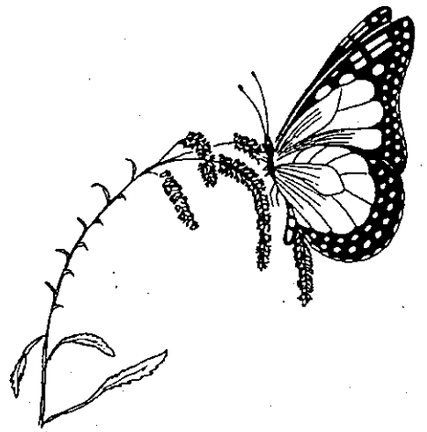
**Birds of a feather.....**

Although many grassland bird populations have plummeted in Illinois over the past thirty years, prairies still host meadowlarks, vesper and grasshopper sparrows, horned larks, goldfinches, and several other species. Red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, short-eared owls, and barn owls hunt the skies over the prairie by day and night. Grasslands remain critical habitat for many species of birds which are on the threatened and endangered list in Illinois, including the greater prairie-chicken, upland sandpiper, and Henslow's sparrow.



**Where prairie meets woodland.....**

The prairie was occasionally dotted with islands of trees called "groves." The grasses and forbs of the prairie covered much of the ground in these groves, making them open woodlands or savannas. Shooting stars, spiderwort, and other woodland flowers were also at home in these drier savannas.



**The role of fire in prairie preservation.....**

For many years, fire was thought to be the enemy of natural landscapes. Forest and grass fires can be dangerous, of course, when near human habitation. But it has been learned that the suppression of fire actually causes more problems for natural communities than an occasional "burn." Prairie plants are deep rooted, and have always been adapted for surviving the fires which swept across the grasslands in late summer and autumn. Such fires helped keep the prairie from being swallowed up by encroaching woodlands. Today, prairie management includes the use of fire to control woody growth and alien species, while giving native plants an opportunity to enjoy increased vigor due to less competition and additional soil nutrients.