

Bluffviews

A quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

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Illinois Nature Preserves Commission Turns 60!

Rapid changes in land use and expanding urban development prompted the Illinois General Assembly to establish the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission in 1963 to create a system of natural areas representative of Illinois' landscape. The Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act (525 ILCS 30) governs the Commission and charges it to preserve, protect and defend natural areas and endangered species habitat for public benefit.

This commitment to preserve the state's rare natural treasures made Illinois the first state to create such an innovative land protection program. The INPC is now a national model, and more than a dozen states have followed its lead. In 1992, the INPC received international acclaim when it was recognized at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro as an "efficient and effective model of how to provide long-term protection for high quality natural areas."



Director of the Dept. of Conservation, William T. Lodge, left, Governor Otto Kerner, seated and Secretary of the INPC, George B. Fell. Photo courtesy INPC.

George B. Fell founded the Illinois nature preserves system. Fell grew up outside Rockford, Illinois where he developed a love of the natural world from a young age. He earned a degree in botany from the University of Illinois and master's degree in wildlife management from the University of Michigan. Following his university education, Fell held several conservation-related jobs in Illinois during which he first promoted the need to protect a system of natural area reserves. This was the late 1940s.

In 1958, Fell created the non-profit Natural Land Institute (NLI). He dedicated himself to passing legislation to establish an Illinois nature preserves system. To separate his non-profit organization from lobbying activities, he formed the Citizens Committee for Nature Conservation.

Governor Kerner vetoed Fell's 1963 bill creating an independent commission but signed legislation placing the

Commission under the umbrella of the Illinois Department of Conservation (IDOC), the precursor of the Department of Natural Resources. Nevertheless, Fell devoted himself to implementing the new legislation.

At the first meeting of the Commission in January 1964, the Commission approved dedicating the southern part of Illinois Beach State Park as a nature preserve. The governor formally approved dedicating this unique area of sand prairie, low dunes and marshland on Oct. 16, 1964 (see photo above). The William and Emma Bohm Memorial Nature Preserve in Madison County, dedicated in 1982, became the first privately owned nature preserve.

Thanks to visionaries 60 years ago, Illinois has a network of protected forests, prairies, wetlands, and other natural communities that constitute the Illinois nature preserves system. 622 sites with 121,532 acres are now protected as Illinois nature preserves and land and water reserves.



Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves

Celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Illinois Nature Preserves System this August!

Illinois Nature Preserve status is the most powerful level of protection a natural area can receive from the state of Illinois. Since its creation 60 years ago, 622 nature preserves and land and water reserves have been dedicated by their landowners and legally protected by the state. Scattered throughout Illinois, these natural areas represent the breadth and quality of the different ecosystems of the state. This is cause for celebration!

Join Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves as we mark this anniversary with a weekend full of programs across the state.

- ❖ **Saturday, August 26**, join one of the dozens of special tours happening in Nature Preserves throughout Illinois (to find the tour that you'd most like to attend, please click on this link and scroll down to the map or read about each one below the map:
<https://friendsofillinoisnaturepreserves.org/inps-weekend/>)

Two of the tours take place in Monroe County-Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve and Storment Haus Nature Preserve.

- ❖ **Sunday, August 27**, we will have an artist talk and gallery showing of painter Philip Juras' oil paintings of 23 different Nature Preserves on display at the Illinois State Museum in Lockport.
 - 2:00 pm – Gallery opens
 - 3:00 pm – Gallery Walk with Philip Juras @ IL State Museum – Lockport Gallery
 - 4:15 pm – Nature Preserves Celebration and cocktail reception @ Gaylord Building
- ❖ **Monday, August 28**, at Illinois Beach Resort in Zion there will be a special public meeting of the Illinois Nature Preserve Commission, where Governor Pritzker will officially recognize August as Illinois Nature Preserve Month. On August 28, 1963, Illinois passed the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act establishing the Illinois Nature Preserves System. Read the Amendment to House Resolution 149 that officially declares August 2023 as Illinois Nature Preserves Month.
 - 2:00PM – Illinois Nature Preserve Commission meeting with guest speakers
 - 3:30PM – Signing ceremony with Governor Pritzker
 - 4:15PM – Remarks, hors d'oeuvres, cake, and a cocktail reception!

Besides the opportunity to become better acquainted with the process to protect Illinois nature, we will also have the chance to show the governor and other elected officials how much protecting nature matters to the conservation community. Advocates and activists for natural areas spurred the creation of the Nature Preserve system 60 years ago, and they are also the ones who have continued to save and celebrate the incredible wildernesses of Illinois. This is not just a private party for big wigs—this is where anyone who cares about the future of our ecosystems can gather and set the agenda for the next 60 years of Prairie State preservation.

Have questions or want more information on any of the events? Please contact Amy at
amy@friendsilnature.org.

High Quality Hill Prairies Require Active Management

By Christopher David Benda, AKA "Illinois Botanizer"

Hill prairies are glorious plant communities. They are the culmination of thousands of years of evolutionary processes. Fertile soils mean every niche is occupied creating a lush landscape devoid of trees, which is the key to maintaining hill prairies in a high quality natural condition.

When Europeans colonized North America, they saw the open prairie as inhospitable for many reasons. They thought any land that did not grow trees was infertile, an indicator of poor soils. Of course, now we know that prairie soil is among the most productive soil in the world! For all the biomass of each plant present above the ground, at least as much and usually more, exists underground as roots. These roots are intertwined with the roots of other plants and their decomposition over thousands of years is why the soil is so rich.

While this is especially true for black soil prairies, hill prairies can have several substrates. In Illinois there are hill prairies on dolomite, glacial drift, gravel, loess, and sand substrates. The most common substrate type for hill prairies in Illinois is loess. Loess is a German word for wind-borne silt. During post-glacial periods, large river valleys like those associated with the Mississippi River and Illinois River were like braided streams during periods of low flow, with the finest sediment on the top surface. The predominantly westerly winds blew the fine, light material to the east, covering most of Illinois with a layer of loess, but especially high on the bluffs along the major rivers.

Why are these areas devoid of trees? This has to do with one obvious cause: fire on the landscape. Lightning caused fires are rare in the Midwest; most wildfires were deliberately set by people, first by indigenous tribes and later European settlers. But as more settlers began to inhabit the landscape, along with fear and misunderstanding of the role of fire, near total fire suppression was implemented. And without periodic fire, trees like Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) began to grow in the hill prairies.



Hill prairie in Monroe County lacking management (left). Photo courtesy J. Fricke. Where cedars grow, little else does (right). Photo courtesy C. D. Benda

However, two other aspects of ecology are responsible for the persistence of hill prairies: slope aspect and wind. Hill prairies tend to occur on steep terrain that faces west and south, areas that receive a lot of sunshine, and the lack of trees allows for wind to move through the hill prairie. These effects dry out hill prairies, favoring herbaceous growth over woody growth.

A review of aerial imagery over time reveals that hill prairies in Illinois have become smaller due to woody encroachment and the two most prominent invaders are Sumac (*Rhus* spp.) and Eastern Red Cedar. Cedar is especially susceptible to fire and proliferates without it. However, they can be cut and removed or burned without using herbicide, making them easier to control than other woody plants like Sumac that often comes back even after being treated with herbicide.

One area in Illinois where hill prairies have been managed is in the bluff corridor of Monroe and Randolph counties. Thanks to the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, CLIFFTOP, Friends of the Illinois Nature Preserves, and private landowners, many hill prairies in this region receive management in the form of selective tree and shrub removal, prescribed fire, and invasive species control, and most of these managed areas are protected in perpetuity as dedicated nature preserves by both public agencies and private landowners.



Bluehearts

One of the rare plant species I'm tracking on an annual basis through the Plants of Concern rare plant monitoring program is Bluehearts (*Buchnera americana*). This species is present in nearly all of the managed hill prairies in Monroe County. Although it does occur at one site not receiving management, it persists only in small prairie openings in between dense stands of Cedar and will likely disappear without intervention.

Yet at the sites that have received management, Bluehearts thrive along other rare plants such as Prairie Parsley (*Polytaenia nuttallii*), Missouri Coneflower (*Rudbeckia missouriensis*), Wedge-leaved Whitlow Grass (*Draba cuneifolia*), and Crested Coralroot Orchid (*Hexalectris spicata*), a state endangered species that has been found in the periphery of hill prairies that have been managed. Thus, the evidence suggests that unmanaged hill prairies are decreasing in natural quality, while the managed hill prairies provide habitat for rare plants and animals, even some that occur nowhere else in Illinois. It is vital that we continue to manage these areas. Thanks to all who have been involved in this work.



Missouri coneflower



Managed prairie in Monroe Co.



The author, out doing his thing for Plants of Concern.



Crested Coralroot Orchid

All photos this page courtesy C. D. Benda

Upcoming events...

Starry Night: Perseid Meteor Shower—Saturday, August 12, 8:00 p.m. until midnight. Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, 3325 G Road, Fults.

Presented by Dr. Michael J. Krawczynski, assistant professor in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Washington University, St. Louis.



Prairie Walks—Saturday August 19 and September 16, 9:00 a.m. Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, 3325 G Road, Fults. Join Clifftop board member, Laura Schaefer, for a 1 mile walking tour of the prairie. The walk will take place along the ADA accessible trail. Laura will help participants identify the native prairie plants along the trail, teach about plant adaptations and prairie ecology. Meet at the pavilion. Dress for the weather and bring a drink to help stay cool. As an added perk, participants in the September 16 walk will be allowed to collect native seeds to take home!

Tour at Storment Hauss Nature Preserve—Saturday, August 26, 10:00 a.m. 3326 Reed Road, Red Bud. Join Clifftop board member, Jim Hill, for an immersive tour of the nature preserve as part of the Illinois Nature Preserves Weekend. See page 3 for more information on other weekend activities.



Live Music—Saturday, September 23, 3:00 until 6:00 p.m. Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, 3325 G Road, Fults. Join us as the Deer Hill Band entertains with their musical stylings in the pavilion. Open to the public, no reservations required.

For those of you who are approaching the age where you will have to start withdrawing funds from a traditional Individual Retirement Account (IRA) or you are the owner of an inherited account*, we offer the following information, taken from the Internal Revenue Service website:

“If you have a required minimum distribution (RMD) on your own account or an inherited account (traditional IRA) and you do not need the funds, donating to charity is a great option. Normally, your required withdrawal will be included in your taxable income and cannot be rolled into other tax-deferred accounts. However, donating your RMD is a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) and will not be taxed up to \$100,000. Tax benefits aside, earmarking this income for charity is a great way to begin or expand your giving portfolio to support the causes you care about.”



*Generally, a designated beneficiary is required to liquidate the account by the end of the 10th year following the year of death of the IRA owner (this is known as the 10-year rule). There are exceptions for certain eligible designated beneficiaries, defined by the IRS. Please consult with your financial advisor regarding the liquidation of an inherited IRA. Clifftop NFP is a qualified charitable recipient.

Photo gallery from recent programs...



Native Snakes of SW Illinois, May 21, 2023

1. Justin Elden displays a milk snake
2. Attendees listen closely
3. Hugh Gilbert introduces a black rat snake to the crowd



PWSNP Prairie Hike, July 15, 2023

- A. Laura discusses plants that come and go over time in a prairie
- B. Laura discusses how ironweed got its name
- C. Laura identifies native vs non-native thistle

