



Bluffviews

a quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

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Clifftop Turns 20

By Joann Fricke

On January 12, 2006, Clifftop held its first meeting. Known back then as the Clifftop Alliance Steering Committee, the original members were: Joan Bade, Ralph Buettner, Carl DauBach, Pen DauBach, Dennis FitzWilliam, Bill Gonterman, George Obernagel and Dennis Knobloch.

The minutes from that meeting indicate that they hit the ground running. Articles of confederation were approved and a geographic area of focus was discussed. It was noted that the current CLIFFTOP boundary coincides with the Northern Section of the Ozark Natural Division designated by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, thus aiding grant planning and CLIFFTOP operations.

A discussion of administrative operations for CLIFFTOP Steering Committee resulted in choosing the organization's initial, official address would be a post-office box in Maestown, IL. P. O. Box 131 is still the organization's official mailing address. A dedicated email address was also designated. Carl and Pen DauBach were elected to serve as co-coordinators for the organization and they continued to lead the organization until 2017.

Initial media contacts included Farm Bureau publications and the Soil and Water Conservation District news. Subsequent media contacts included the former Monroe County Independent, Republic-Times and North County News. At the present, Clifftop offers members this quarterly newsletter and information posted to our Facebook page.

Original Steering Committee members approved the concept of both an Annual Bulletin and a workshop focused on Woodlands Management in 2006 for all eligible participants within the CLIFFTOP geographic area of focus. In January 2007, a Prairie & Grasslands Management workshop was held. (I, personally, attended the Prairie & Grasslands workshop. It was particularly memorable as it was held at the SWIC campus in Red Bud and no one had told the SWIC staff so the heat was not on! Brrr!)

In the years hence, Clifftop NFP has incorporated, become a membership based organization and a land trust. Clifftop currently owns 3 nature preserves (White Rock NP, Paul Wightman Subterranean NP and Storment Hauss NP) and 2 land and water reserves (White Rock LWR and the 54-acre Luella Schaefer Memorial Hill Prairies LWR), encompassing approximately 1,200 acres, all in Monroe County.

We continue to advocate for the preservation, protection, stewardship and conservation of high quality natural areas in the bluff land corridor in Monroe, Randolph and St. Clair Counties. We are planning several interesting and informative programs for this year. Please see Upcoming Events on page 4.

Dog People

By Christine Latinette with help from Girl
& in memory of Thunder & Chief

Not all outdoor lovers are dog lovers, and not all dog lovers are outdoor lovers, but many are. If you're lucky, you get to enjoy them both-often.

I may be preaching to the choir, but the benefits of spending time outdoors are widely known and recognized. Scandinavians call it *friluftsliv*, Japanese practice forest bathing or *shinrin-yoku*. If you Google daily healthy habits you'll find — spend time outdoors to boost immune function, lower blood pressure, and improve mood.

Now, for us dog lovers, the American Kennel Club and the Mayo Clinic both say dogs are great for us too. Physically they get us up and moving and hopefully outside too. Mentally their enthusiasm is contagious. They live in the moment. There is a reason why dogs are chosen for therapy, emotional support and service.



I've not always been in a position to have a dog but when I did, I spent more time in nature at all times of the year, a win-win.

As a retiree, I won't pretend that there are days or times when having a dog and the weather don't cooperate. Our summer heat and humidity make schedules change to early morning or late evening-maybe some lucky pool time. Our winter cold does the opposite, moving walks to midday. Rain is no bargain. But for my dog, it doesn't seem to matter. Fallen leaves might be the greatest thing my dog has ever romped through, until the snow comes.

For dog owners who have to go to work, schedules and time outside can be less flexible. Maybe weekends and fetch in the yard are all you can fit in. But I hope you get to spend time outside with your dog. It's good for you both.

Before I became a member of Clifftop, I was a fan and user of various sites, including Fults Hill Prairie NP and Paul Wightman Subterranean NP. As a dog owner, I brought my dog with me to both. The dog and I love each visit. I enjoy the sights and sounds, my dog is more interested in the smells. (I don't have to remind you to be a responsible dog owner and follow site rules for leash and pickup.)

As I write this, my dog is having a glorious indoor time with a tennis ball. It won't even compare to the exuberance she will show once we get outside with it. Maybe we will see you out there.



Ecology of the Subnivian Zone

By Laura Walther Schaefer

The ten-day stretch of below-freezing temperatures ended February 2. It feels notable until you read that the longest below-freezing span in recent history was sixty-five days long from December 6, 1944 to February 8, 1945. Perhaps what made this stretch more memorable was the seemingly rare addition of eight plus inches of snow or the fact that it came at the end of the Persephone Days (Nov 18 - Jan 23), a time when plant growth slows as day length is less than ten hours long or even the marking of Imbolc (Feb 1- the Gaelic tradition of celebrating the midway point between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox). Whatever your reason(s) for this seemingly special time, it also came with the development of a unique microhabitat or ecotone known as the subnivian layer. An ecotone is boundary zone between two habitats. You might think of the area where a woods meets a prairie along the woodland edge. It is characterized by often being more biologically diverse as it intersects the world where forest life meets grassland.



In Latin, subnivian means under (sub) snow (nives). This is the microhabitat where the radiant heat of the earth melts the snow touching the ground. The water vapor freezes, creating a ceiling and therefore a gap between the earth and the snow layer, as seen on the left. This layer acts like a greenhouse where gases are trapped (higher carbon dioxide and humidity), and the temperature remains consistently around thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, regardless of the air temperature and wind speed above the snow. For a subnivian zone to exist, a minimum of six to eight inches of snow is needed. Another way a subnivian zone can form is under plant debris, logs, or rocks, as seen below.

Depending on snow depth, the zone can be two to twenty-four inches tall. Due to these features, it becomes a sanctuary for plants to grow, and microbes, insects, and small mammals to become active. Some small native Illinois mammals (subnivian fauna) that may take advantage of this space include rodents and insectivores, like mice, shrews, voles, rats, and ground squirrels. Illinois has three species of native voles (meadow, prairie, woodland), six species of native mice (cotton, golden, deer, meadow jumping, western harvest, white-footed), six species of shrews (N short-tailed, S short-tailed, American pigmy, masked, N. American least, SE), and two species of native rats (marsh rice, eastern wood).



Note that all of these mammals lack winter camouflage, so they do not have to worry about fur color in the subnivian. Within this seasonal housing, mammals sleep, reproduce, cache seeds, and forage. The success of the populations of their predators is directly tied to the well-being of these and other small mammals. Predators of subnivian animals include fox, coyote, owls, and hawks. While these predators cannot see their prey, they hunt by their good hearing.

Also active are the microbes- the bacteria and fungi busily decomposing animal waste and dead plant debris. These might be the most critical components to the subnivian and thus climate change. They store

nitrogen from the snow and plants they consume. Come spring, they die, and their bodies leave behind nitrogen stores which feed plants just when they need it most- during active spring growth. A warming world has influenced the timing of snowfall, amounts, and the density of the snow- impacting light penetration. Plant growth impacts carbon dioxide uptake. If there is less nitrogen available in spring, there is less plant growth, and therefore carbon sequestration by the plants. The "little things that run the world" must include microbes. Besides climate change, other detriments to the subnivian zone include snowmobiles and ATVs.

As the snow melts this week, take a look around for the telltale signs of life in the subnivian - the trails and tunnels left behind from the busybodies below. Revel in knowing that a quiet, liliputian ecosystem was alive and bursting with energy below our feet, all while it appeared as if the earth was slumbering under a heavy crystalline blanket of snow.

Upcoming events...



Eagle Fest, March 7, 2026, 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. at the Jerry F. Costello Lock & Dam, 4800 Lock & Dam Road, Modoc, IL. Stop by Clifftop's table and register to win this 12" plush eagle. Drawing at 2:00 p.m.

Spring Wildflower Walk, April 18, 2026, time TBD, White Rock NP, 6438 Bluff Road, Valmeyer, IL. Hosted jointly by HeartLands Conservancy and Clifftop. Enjoy the many lovely spring wildflowers along the driveway and trails. Details and how to register to follow.



Chainsaw Technique & Safety Workshop, April/May (date and time TBD), White Rock NP, 6438 Bluff Road, Valmeyer, IL. Presented by U of I Extension Forestry. Attendees will be allowed to practice, with their own chainsaws, cutting down small diameter trees. Some maintenance and sharpening techniques will be included. Details and how to register will be forthcoming.

Mother's Day Bird ID Hike, May 10, 2026, 7:00 a.m. White Rock NP, 6438 Bluff Road, Valmeyer, IL. Presented by Mike Avara, Avian Lab Manager and Field Coordinator, U of I. Details and how to register will be forthcoming.

