

Wildlife Prairie State Park History

Wildlife Prairie Park began in the late 1960's when the Forest Park Foundation established a working relationship with the Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield Zoo to use some Foundation land as an endangered species breeding farm and rest area. The idea was abandoned when the Brookfield Zoo became involved in a major renovation and management change.

The plan was then to use the land to create a park where the animals could live some-what freely. Among others, Marlin Perkins agreed with our idea that it be only for native Illinois animals. Very few parks had been built around similar themes, wintering the animals would be easier and it would better portray Illinois' natural history.

From that point on, the Park began to evolve into what it is today. Extensive construction work was begun. As often as possible, recycled materials were used to reduce costs and to save resources as much as possible. Some of the recycled materials used in the building of the Park are the bricks in the patio near the Visitor Center and at the Train Depot, the old whiskey barrels used as refuse containers, the re-sawn timbers in the buildings and the many telephone poles used in the gates and bridges throughout the Park. Many of the bridges and habitats had to be built totally by hand to protect the natural foliage.

Throughout its construction, the Park has had three purposes: these are to conserve; to educate about conservation, wildlife and many other resources; and to provide a place where this can be accomplished while having fun. The Park continues to work toward these goals. The Park opened for the first time in the fall of 1978 for six weeks. On September 5, 2000 William Rutherford Jr. presented the deed to Wildlife Prairie State Park to Governor George Ryan. Shortly thereafter, Wildlife Prairie Park became

The Hazel & Bill Rutherford Wildlife Prairie State Park.

Discover Your Wild Side



Self-Guided Tour

**We welcome you to the Park
and hope that you will enjoy
your visit here today.**



**Walk the animal
trails with us and
imagine the beauty
and diversity that
once was Illinois.**

***We will begin at the viewing area between
the Visitor Center and the snack shop at the
bison/elk overlook.***

Bison/Elk Overlook:

As you look out over these fields, you are seeing the magnificent grazing animals that once roamed the tall grass prairie of Illinois. These animals are symbols of open space, freedom, and wilderness.

The bison, or buffalo as the settlers called them, had a close brush with extinction at the end of the 19th century. Their numbers fell from 30 million to less than 500 individual animals. With our small, healthy herd that you see here, we are doing our part to help restore the bison. We have an average of 8 or 9 little reddish calves born every year. See how closely the calves stay with their mother? No cow will nurse a calf other than its own, which means that this close bond is essential for survival of the calf. You may wonder why the calves are a reddish color. This protects the calves because their natural enemies, the wolf and the cougar, are color-blind and cannot see the calf hiding in the grass. The cow snorts in a certain way when danger is near, warning the calf to hold perfectly still until danger is past.

Bison have been found to have a natural immunity to some kinds of cancer. Medical researchers are studying them and are trying to find out the source of their immunity. Bison also teach us an important conservation lesson: to give something back to the earth that gives us our food. When bison graze, some of their saliva is left at the base of the plant. Their saliva contains a plant growth hormone that stimulates the grasses to re-grow, leaving the vegetation more luxurious than it was before.

Our largest bull bison weighs close to 2,000 pounds (1 metric ton). The cows, or females, are smaller, but they resemble the males due to the fact that they both have horns. These horns are permanent and grow from year to year.

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small movements on the ground below and they will dive quickly to capture it with their strong talons. Red-Tailed Hawks are common in Illinois and are often seen roadside perched on a telephone pole or tree. Like all birds of prey, they are federally protected.

Turkey Vultures eat dead animal carcasses and are mistakenly thought of as a dirty or disease infested bird, but the opposite is actually true. Their digestive system houses acids capable of killing most bacteria. Their featherless head serves to protect the body from bacterial infection by eliminating a place for bacteria to collect while eating. Turkey Vultures will spend up to 3 hours daily grooming themselves by preening their feathers and bathing in water. They are sometimes referred to as "nature's garbage collectors" as they clean up roadside carcasses and eliminate the spread of disease by devouring these dead animals.

You are now at the end of your tour. The Visitor Center is straight up the blacktop trail to your left. We thank you for touring the animal trails with us today. Snacks and drinks are available in the Arboretum snack shop if you would like to stop there. The recreation area, playground, fifty-foot sliding board, and train provide an enjoyable conclusion to the day for young people. Please also feel free to stop by to visit the Snakes n' More exhibit to see some of our native reptiles and amphibians. You may also want to browse in our two gift shops located in the Visitor Center, and in the Visitor Center Parking Lot.

For further information about the park, please feel free to stop by the Information Desk in the Visitor Center.

make them unable to fly or survive in the wild. The most well known of all of these birds are the Bald Eagles.

Bald Eagles are currently protected by four different federal acts, including the Endangered Species Act. The eagle population declined in the 1950's due to the use of a pesticide called DDT. From eating infected fish, the DDT would build up in the eagles. This caused structural weakness in the eagle's eggshells, which would crack when being incubated. DDT was banned from use in the U.S. and Bald Eagle numbers have been recovering. They were down-listed from the Endangered Species List in the summer of 1994 and placed on the Threatened Species List. Now over 8,000 breeding pairs of Bald Eagles have been spotted in the lower 48 states. This is an encouraging sign for the eagle, but continued protection of its nesting, roosting, and feeding areas is essential.

Great Horned Owls are one of the largest and most powerful owls in North America. With its exceptional hearing and excellent eyesight, these owls are well equipped to hunt in the dark of night, and feed on rodents, skunks, snakes and even other birds. Their prey is swallowed whole or in large pieces. The non-digestible bones, fur or feathers are regurgitated 10-12 hours later in the form of a pellet. These pellets are of great use to biologists because even an unseen bird's feeding habits can be extensively studied.

Red-Tailed Hawks prefer mixed habitat with open pastures, woods, streams and bluffs. One pair may hold the same territory year after year, and are thought to mate for life. They hunt during the day while soaring the thermal air currents that rise up from the ground. Their exceptional binocular vision enables them to pick up

smaller, but they resemble the males due to the fact that they both have horns. These horns are permanent and grow from year to year.

The antlers that you see on the male elk and white-tailed deer are grown and shed each year as an essential part of the reproduction cycle. Increasing light of day in the early spring triggers the production of antler growth hormones. Shorter day length in the early winter stops antler growth and the antlers stay attached until late winter when they drop off to become food for rodents like mice, squirrels and woodchucks.

You can see that the elk have a great dignity and poise as they hold their heads high and survey their surroundings. During the rut, or mating season in the fall, the largest bull will lower his head and drive all the smaller, less vigorous bulls away from his harem, using his rack of antlers as a challenge. He will then be the father of all the calves born the next spring and summer. This is nature's way of making sure that all the calves are as strong and healthy as possible and that the species will survive.

When you are ready, leave the viewing deck and turn toward the Visitor Center to view the animal nursery, which is housed behind the Visitor Center.

Animal Nursery:

Here is where some of the orphaned/injured animals the park receives each year are housed as they await their release back into the wild. The animals housed here may vary from day to day, so stop by and take a look.

As you leave the animal nursery, go around the Visitor Center and turn right when you reach the front

of the center. Begin your walk on the blacktop trail straight ahead, then veer off to the right shortly after you enter the trail gate to visit the wolf enclosure.

Wolf Enclosure:

The Gray Wolf, or Canis Lupus, once roamed throughout Illinois and in fact, was commonly found in all of the lower 48 states. A subspecies of the Grey Wolf, the Eastern Timber Wolf, was extirpated from Illinois in the mid-1800's. One of the main reasons for this was because for years, the wolf was surrounded by tales that caused people to fear and hate them, such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Peter and the Wolf.' Also, the wolves were direct competition for hunters for prey such as deer, elk, and rabbits.

Wolves are very social animals, and live in family groups called packs. Within each pack there is a social hierarchy system, with the dominant or alpha pair being at the top of the ladder. It is typically the only pair that breeds within the pack. Since they are social animals, wolves communicate with each other in numerous ways. They use their facial expressions, tail position, and howling for communication. You can tell a wolf's position in the pack by how high or low the tail is held. The higher the tail, the higher the wolf's place in the pack. Their long noses give them a keen sense of smell which they use to hunt and also to identify other members in the pack.

All of the reasons why wolves howl are not known, but scientists have gained some understanding about them. Wolf voices are individual. When a pack is separated, howling can identify which wolf is howling and where that wolf is located. Howling is also used by the leader of the pack to bring together all of its members. Howling is also thought to be a way in which a pack tells other wolf packs, "This is my territory."

As you leave the overlook, you will see a woodchip path straight ahead. This path, on the Wagon Trail Loop, will lead you back to the blacktopped path by the Visitor Center. Along the way you will pass our river otters and our aviary that houses raptors and Turkey Vultures.

River Otter Enclosure:

Few animals retain their playful behavior into adulthood. One universal appeal of the river otter is its exuberance and joy of living expressed in games of underwater tag, keep away, juggling & acrobatics, as well as communal slides down muddy or snowy banks into the water.

As a carnivore at the top of its food chain, the otter may be considered helpful to man as an indicator species of the condition of our waterways. At one time, river otters faced extremely low populations. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources sought to reverse this trend and conducted a reintroduction program. The success of the program is evident as we once again are delighted to see otters and their offspring in and around the Illinois River.

As you leave the river otter enclosure, travel down the trail and you will come across the aviary on your right hand side.

Aviary/Raptor Area:

The raptor area is where we house most of our birds of prey. Here you will see Great Horned Owls, Bald Eagles, Red-Tailed Hawks, and Turkey Vultures. All of the birds in this area have permanent wing injuries that

likely see some birds—geese, Sandhill Cranes and maybe even ducks. The Sandhill Cranes were among the earliest birds to evolve, with fossils dating back to 40 million years. Their relationship to reptiles is evident in the scales they have on their legs and head. Their loud trumpeting call may be heard for miles and has been aptly described as being prehistoric. The windpipe that produces these calls can be up to five feet long.

Sandhill Cranes were nearly driven to extinction in the late 1800's. Today their largest threat is wetland destruction. As the wetlands are drained, the marsh habitat that is so critical for the cranes and many other species is lost forever.

As you exit Walden Pond, turn right onto the gravel trail and continue to the bear/bison overlook.

Bear/Bison Overlook:

The black bears to your left were orphans that have found a good home here with us at the park. You may often see them either playing in their pool or lounging in the sun.

This overlook gives you a better view of the bison/elk pasture, and a better idea of its size. The animals have free roam of this entire 80 acres during the spring, summer and fall months, and are moved to a different pasture in the winter. If you look south, you may see our cabin on the hill overlooking the bison/elk pasture. These cabins, as well as four cabooses are available for guests to rent.

Please continue down the blacktop path and enter Merrill Woods on your left hand side (the path becomes wood chips).

Red Fox Enclosure:

Think you smell a skunk? It is probably the red fox. It has a scent gland resembling that of a skunk, which it uses as a means of communication. The red fox may be curled up into a tight ball across from you, along the back fence, or it may be seen stepping gracefully along one of its trails with its thick, bushy tail straight out behind it. The red fox weighs about 6 to 8 pounds when fully grown. The black on its ears, legs, and nose absorbs solar heat, which helps to keep these extremities from freezing in the winter.

The red fox usually prefers border areas between forest and meadow. It is a diurnal hunter (hunting during the day), but may be considered a crepuscular animal, meaning it is usually seen during dawn and dusk. Also, the red fox is usually seen more often than the gray fox, which we will meet next. The diet of the red fox consists of rodents and rabbits, but occasionally it can be seen eating birds, reptiles, and some insects. In the summer and fall the bulk of its diet consists of fruits and seeds.

If you continue down the path, you will come across our gray fox enclosure on the left hand side of the bridge. Their enclosure continues beyond the bridge as the wood chip path curves left. On the right side of the bridge, you will find the black bear enclosure.

Gray Fox Enclosure:

The gray fox is a difficult animal to see. You can often find them lying directly underneath the bridge by the rocks, as well as off to the very right hand corner of the enclosure near the drainage area on the rocks. Also, look closely into the tangled brush because the gray fox never strays far from the trees and the shrubby cover. The gray fox is extremely shy. It is a nocturnal creature, doing all of its hunting at night, which is why it is rarely seen during the day. If you are having trouble locating the gray fox, check the trees. It has long, curved, retractable claws that enable it to climb. Occasionally they build their dens in trees, sometimes 15 feet above ground. Its diet is similar to that of the red fox, its main food source consisting of rabbits and rodents.

Black Bear Enclosure:

In spite of the story of the three bears, papa bear does not live in the same house as momma bear or, help to raise baby bear. In the wild the male bear is a loner. Black bear cubs are born in January because this is the safest time for black bears in the wild. The mother bear awakens from her winter sleep just long enough to wash the cubs and curl around them to keep them warm. At birth the cubs weigh 8 ounces, are blind, deaf, furless, and have hind legs that do not work. Their mother could not chase them if she had to, so nature has made sure that the cubs won't go anywhere. There are two mammary glands close to the birth canal where the cubs can easily find them to nurse. They grow quickly on rich milk, and in two or three months they are ready to come out of the den just as their mother awakens from her hibernating condition. The timing of nature once again is perfect.

temporary holding area while renovations are done to other enclosures. As you approach the next bridge, you will see the current bear enclosure from another angle on the right side of the bridge.

Continue on the path out of Merrill Woods. If you wish to return to the Visitor Center or your car, turn right on the blacktopped path. To continue on for another ½ mile of trails and explore the Pioneer Area, turn left and proceed up the hill. Here, you will find restrooms, drinking fountains, and a playground. The badger enclosure before entering the Pioneer Area is currently empty, so please proceed to the Pioneer Area. If you do not wish to visit the Pioneer Area, please turn right down the gravel trail to visit Walden Pond.

Pioneer Area:

Here at the Pioneer Area you might want to take time to visit the one room Graham Chapel School House and the pioneer log cabin. Also, please feel free to take advantage of the petting area by the Pioneer Farmstead, including a visit to our domestic horse 'Dandy,' our goats, sheep, domestic cattle, prairie chickens, and our racing pigeons.

After visiting the Pioneer Area, continue on to Walden Pond off of the main gravel trail, outside the Pioneer Area.

Walden Pond:

Walden Pond is a very unique place here at the park. It is the only enclosure that houses four of the five vertebrate animal families: birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. You may not see all of these, but you will most

Enjoy the cool, westerly breeze off the lake and look for Largemouth Bass, Bluegill, and Green Sunfish in the water. As you continue along, you will notice our stand of prairie to your right. The tall grass prairie once covered most of Illinois and is given credit for our rich fertile soil.

At this point, you may choose to turn around and return to Merrill Woods or turn left and walk the paved service road to our French Trapper/Indian Guide overlook.

French Trapper/Indian Guide Overlook:

Observe the bronze canoe afloat the lake and the bronze statuary under the pavilion. The signage here will help you to learn of the early relationship between the trappers and the guides.

From this point, you may continue your hike up the service road and observe the tranquility of this seldom utilized trail. As it is a service road, please watch for staff as they go about their work. This path will lead you all the way back to the ticket gate where you first entered the park, so you will need to allow time to also hike back to the main area.

You may also choose to turn back and follow your steps back to Merrill Woods, or walk past the prairie and continue straight on the service road. This will lead you to the Pioneer Playground on your right and the schoolhouse and Pioneer restrooms on your left.

Exiting Merrill Woods:

After crossing the bridge between the bobcat and cougar enclosures, turn right and continue to the next bridge. The large enclosure on the left hand side does not currently house any animals and is used as a

As you continue to walk the trail, you will find the coyote enclosure on the left.

Coyote Enclosure:

Smaller than the wolf, the coyote is easily recognized by its large ears, pointed snout, and long slender legs. Its diet varies, consisting mainly of small rodents and rabbits. Currently, rodents eat approximately 1/5 of our human food supply. Coyotes in Illinois eat hundreds of rodents every day, making them great exterminators.

Like the fox, the coyote occasionally avoids traps and is therefore accused of being cunning and deceitful. But wild coyotes need not be feared or hated. They control their own numbers depending on the natural food supply.

~~*Please continue to the bobcat enclosure.*~~

Bobcat Enclosure:

Bobcats are still found throughout Illinois. Look carefully in all the trees for one sleeping in the branches. There may be another curled up on the cool stream bank or on a hillside to the left or right. So shy and secretive is the wild bobcat that if a mother in labor is disturbed by a backpacker walking nearby, the labor contractions will stop and the kitten will be born handicapped, deformed, or even dead.

Can you see the tufts on the tips of the bobcat's ears? These send sound waves down into the ears. The bobcat then waits and surprises its prey, which is usually a rabbit or mouse. The underside of the bobcat's tail is

white. When the mother is ready to take her kittens out hunting, she raises her tail and the kittens line up behind that white flag. A full-grown bobcat weighs between 20 and 25 pounds, which is somewhat larger than your typical house cat. Other than size, a bobcat can be easily distinguished from a house cat by the back of its ears. Black with a large white spot in the center, the bobcat's ears can be described as having eye spots, and can help to deter predators.

If you continue to the next bridge, you may be able to see the bobcats at a different angle on the left, and the cougar enclosure is to the right of the bridge.

Cougar Enclosure:

The cougar is also known by the names mountain lion, puma, and catamount. Cougar populations diminished in Illinois during the late 1800's due to hunting and habitat destruction. Cougars are the largest members of the small cat family, which includes your house cat. And like house cats, they prefer solitude. The cougar is strictly a meat eater and obtains its energy from animals usually larger than itself, such as deer and elk. Male cougars weigh an average of 165 pounds, while the females weigh less. A large cougar may measure eight and one-half to ten feet from the nose to the tip of the tail. Cougars are excellent jumpers. They can jump 30 feet horizontally and 18 feet vertically. Cougars are very secretive as they stalk and ambush their prey, much the same as other cats. Powerful front legs with oversized paws that contain sharp, retractable claws, as well as strong jaws with long, sharp teeth enable the cougar to capture its prey.

At the end of this bridge you may choose to go straight ahead onto the Helige Trail, a ¼ mile path through woods and fields to a beautiful strip mine lake, or turn right and continue on the Merrill Woods trail. If continuing on the Merrill Woods trail, please skip to 'Exiting Merrill Woods' on page 10.

Helige Trail:

Continuing on the wood chip trail across the gravel service road, you'll find that the terrain forms a sanctuary for the wild animals and songbirds of the park. Continuing on through the woods, look carefully for wildflowers and other interesting plants, and listen for the songs from a variety of birds. The short path to the left leads you uphill to an overlook where it will dead-end over North Lake. Proceeding to the right, you will eventually cross a wooden bridge and soon come to a duck blind.

Duck Blind:

On the logs, painted turtles may be sunning themselves, while Mallard ducks and Canada geese swim by. In the spring, you may notice that the male and female Mallard Ducks look different. The female is mottled brown to blend into the environment while sitting on her nest. The bright green head of the male helps him to attract female ducks. Twice a year these ducks molt or shed their body feathers. During one of these molts, the male resembles the females. This is called the eclipse plumage. Geese molt once a year during the summer. This conveniently takes place at the same time the goslings are growing up, so both adults and the young are flightless at the time they need to stay together.