The modern world tried—but failed—to tame the sandy wetland that is now Iroquois County State Wildlife Area.

Sand in the Way of Progress

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Mark Baldwin

Chances are pretty good that the landscape where you live in Illinois isn't what it used to be. In fact, the majority of people living in Illinois, wherever they live, probably have never seen the earth beneath their feet as it originally looked a few hundred years ago. The landscape that surrounds us today, the cities and paved streets and subdivisions, the parking lots and megastores looming everywhere we travel, have long since erased most of that original world our forebears encountered not so long ago. Even in the rural regions of Illinois, those wide-open places where agriculture is now king, more than 99.9 percent of the original grassland that made us the Prairie State has now been plowed under.

With time, a landscape that no longer exists can be forgotten. Progress has a way of erasing even the memory of nature. As decades pass, as the remaining vestiges of original Illinois vanish and become something different, the opportunity for anyone anywhere to see and experience the true landscape of Illinois also fades into history.

Yet, in just a few places, often by accident, the original habitat and landscape of our once-wild Midwestern state remains as it always has existed.

One of those survivors is a place

The idea that all wild, undeveloped land needed to be converted into something productive never worked out in the sandy marshes of what is now Iroquois County State Wildlife Area.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

known as Iroquois County State Wildlife Area, and it survives surprisingly close to the urban otherworld of Kankakee and Chicago, tucked away in an overlooked region near the Indiana border in northeast Illinois. Here visitors will find a stubborn remnant of ancient Illinois where progress tried—and failed—to turn the watery, sandy, post-glacial landscape into something other than what nature had created thousands of years ago.

Fortunately for the plants and animals that thrived and depended upon this once-massive marsh habitat known as the Kankakee Sands southeast of Kankakee, attempts to wrangle this stubborn landscape into something modern finally ceased in 1944. The State of Illinois saw a different kind of opportunity for this undeveloped no-man's land. The progress-resistant section of habitat nobody could tame, part of the vast, Kankakee Sands formation, became a last-resort reservation for a species of increasingly rare wildlife.

"Back then it was established as a sanctuary to protect the last of the Illinois prairie-chickens," explained Department of Natural Resources biologist Eric Smith, who now monitors the 2,480 acres of flora and fauna that thrive amid these ancient sand dunes and wet prairies. "The problem was, the prairie-chicken, which had lost much of the dry, grassland habitat it requires, didn't do well in the wet, sand-prairie habitat here."

Still, the failed attempt to save greater prairie-chickens in this now-protected habitat ensured the continued protection of the native flora and fauna. Even after the effort failed to sustain that species (downstate Jasper and Marion counties now hold the last sites in Illinois where greater prairie-chickens still roam wild), land managers realized that the original residents of the land here were worth protecting. Plants and animals rarely seen elsewhere, if at all, thrived in the ancient glacial habitat made of sand dunes, wet prairies and sand savannas.

The ancient habitat of the Kankakee Sands still exists much as it has for thousands of years at Iroquois County. A simple trail system (including winter snowmobile trails) affords a view of this prehistoric habitat.

Never heard of this region called the Kankakee Sands? You're not alone. The once-vast region south of Lake Michigan is a geological wonder seldom mentioned among the top natural features of Illinois. Yet the Grand Kankakee Marsh, which at one point covered an estimated 400,000 to 1 million acres, was as large or larger than the famously sprawling 438,000-acre Okefenokee Swamp in Florida.

As the last glacial ice melted northward 14,000 years ago, huge deposits of sand were left behind in what is now the Kankakee River valley that extends into modern-day Indiana. When European settlers arrived, they managed to drain what lands they could for farming and development. And by the 20th century, after networks of trenches and ditches were cut in the name of progress, much of the Grand Kankakee Marsh had finally been drained.

(Photo by Eric Smith.)

But, here and there, residual stretches of landscape defied the alterations of progress. And the land that is now Iroquois County State Wildlife Area was as stubborn as they come.

"They tried to drain it but it was just too wet," Smith said. "You can still see the little ditches on the aerial photographs."

In the years following the formal protection of the site, as additional

(Photo by Steve Patterson.)

The red squirrel is an uncommon resident of Illinois but its population is increasing in northeast Illinois.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

A hand trap range is available on site for shotgunners gearing up for the fall hunting season.

acres were purchased, compatible outdoor recreation opportunities—including hunting and hiking and picnicking—were offered to the public while carefully protecting the original nature of this special habitat.

"The controlled pheasant hunting program has been a major attraction for decades," said site superintendent Frank Snow, who balances visitor traffic with habitat protection. The site bustles with hunter activity in the fall and winter, drawing in sportsmen from nearby Kankakee and not-too-distant Chicago. "We also offer both archery and firearm deer hunting throughout the season, as well as opportunities for rabbits and other upland game." (See sidebar)

In the long months between hunting seasons, visitors to the site encounter a tranquil passage into Illinois prehistory.

"During the spring," Snow observed, "one of the attractions is total solitude. It really is an oasis of wilderness."

Solitude remains one of the primary reasons to visit this gem of wild Illinois. Located just a few miles from the Indiana border in the northeast edge of Iroquois County, the site features thriving populations of some of the rarest of the rare in Illinois, including an astonishing diversity of habitat-specific insects.

"It's certainly among the top sites in terms of insect diversity anywhere in Illinois," Smith maintained. "The state-threatened regal fritillary butterfly can be found here." Additionally, the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly, which is known to occur in the Kankakee Sands region, requires the same kind of habitat being protected at Iroquois County SWA. The caterpillars of that federally endangered species feed exclusively on the leaves of wild lupine plants—a plant that can be found in the sandy, prairie habitat of this rare, state-protected habitat.

But the plants at Iroquois entice more than just insects. Shutterbugs also go wild there, and for more than just lupines.

"I'll bet this is one of the most-photographed sites in the state," Smith continued. "It's just a show of blazing-star in late summer. Every July the phone in my office starts ringing with photographers wanting to know if the blazing star is in bloom yet."

Recognizing the high numbers of state- and federally listed species that depend on this habitat, 560 acres of the site is a dedicated nature preserve. The remaining acres are registered as a land and water reserve. Visitors might catch a glimpse of the diminutive red squirrel, once nearly extirpated from Illinois but making a recently discovered comeback. The state-threatened Blandings

At a glance

Iroquois County State Wildlife Area, 2803 East 3300 North Road, Beaverville, IL 60912
Telephone: (815) 435-2218
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r3/Iroquois.htm
Directions: Located approximately 15 miles southeast of Kankakee, exit Interstate 57 (exit 312) at Kankakee. Take Illinois Route 17 east approximately 5.5 miles to Illinois Route 1. Turn south (right) and continue on Route 1 approximately 7 miles (passing through St. Anne). Turn east on County Road 3300 N. Continue east approximately 6.5 miles to the site.

(Photo by Frank Zimmerman.)

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Some of the plants dependent upon the sandy-soil habitats include (clockwise from upper left) bird's foot violet, puccoon, tall green milkweed, yellow wild indigo and sundew.

turtle, not documented on the site for more than 30 years, was rediscovered this spring at several locations. The state-threatened ornate box turtle can be found there as well.

"I could go on and on about the number of rare plants and animals that can be found on the site," Smith said. "Yellow baptisia (*Baptisia tinctoria*) was thought to be extirpated from the state but has been rediscovered. The site holds nearly 100 species in greatest need of conservation in Illinois."

In general, to maintain the quality of the habitat, all visitor access to Iroquois is by foot (although a portion of a 1-mile, self-guided hiking trail is accessible by wheelchair and snowmobilers are permitted to use 12 miles of signed trails that follow the fire control lanes and service road). At various points within the site—easily accessible to parking areas—picnickers will find picnic tables and grills, along with sanitary facilities. Drinking water is available at the site headquarters. During hunting season, a concession is operated at the site headquarters.

Other resource-compatible options include dog-training areas (closed from April 1-Aug. 1 to protect breeding wildlife) and a hand trap range for shotgunners (closed Nov.-Dec.)

The highest priority for land managers there is to maintain this treasure of ancient Illinois while providing recreational access to visitors. Know that on any particular day in certain seasons, smoke might be visible on the horizon. The natural wildfires that once maintained the plant communities in prehistoric times are now conducted as prescribed burns throughout the year. It's a necessary force that maintains the park-like appearance of the black-oak savannas, where the larger, widely spaced trees do not get overgrown with underbrush and saplings.

"Fire has always been a natural and essential part of this ecosystem," Smith explained. "It's why we burn the sedge meadow and the black oak savanna regularly."

In the autumn, as the explosion of blazing-star and other sand prairie wildflowers fade into gold, hunters arrive with big hopes. Site superintendent Snow said that while participants in the controlled pheasant hunting program were down slightly last year, archery and firearm deer hunting increased.

"Deer hunters love the site," he said. "And there were some great bucks taken here last year, including during the disabled hunter program."

And while the busy hunting season means lots of activity within the designated hunting areas, the remainder of the year—and within the protected nature preserve—there are plenty of opportunities for visitors to experience that rare, solitude-filled image of Illinois as it has always existed. The failure of progress, it turns out, wasn't such a failure.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Blazing-star, a wildflower that thrives in the wet sand prairies at Iroquois County SWA, can be spotted during August.

Hunter information

The area is operated primarily as a permit pheasant hunting area; however, there is rabbit, quail and pheasant hunting on the area after the permit season has concluded. Prior to the permit portion of the hunting season, squirrel and dove provide the early hunting action. Deer hunting (bow only) is allowed on the area prior to and following the permit portion of the hunting season. Lesser opportunities for woodcock, rail, snipe and deer (shotgun) also are available. Check with the site superintendent for upland game species and hunting dates.

A Hunter Fact Sheet can be downloaded at dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/hunter_fact_sheet/R3hfs/irc.htm.

During the permit pheasant season, all hunters must check in and check out, before and after hunting, at the area headquarters.

Before and after the permit pheasant season, all hunters, must check out at the area headquarters after hunting.

Raccoon and opossum may be taken only with a special permit issued by the site superintendent.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Sportsmen enjoy the controlled pheasant hunting opportunities provided in late autumn and winter at the site. Archery deer hunting as well as other upland game hunting also is available.