Located less than 15 miles from the Chicago Loop, Wolf Road Prairie preserves a

An Urban

Photos By Jerry Kumery

Touted as one of the largest and best-quality black-soil prairies east of the Mississippi River, Wolf Road Prairie represents a type of habitat that is threatened worldwide. The site's black-soil savanna is listed in The Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan as globally critically imperiled. In addition to being a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, Wolf Road Prairie has been nominated as a National Natural Landmark.

The Pottawatomi village of Saugannaka remained within the boundaries of Wolf Road Prairie following the Blackhawk War of 1833. By 1852, a farming community existed in the area; however some sections were too wet to plow or graze extensively and remained largely untouched. The community of Westchester was incorporated there in 1926.

butterflyweed, *Gaura sp.*

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

marsh plants

eastern-tailed blue, *Everes comyntas*

world-renowned example of Illinois' native grassland.

Oasis

An excellent example of the original tallgrass prairie of Illinois, and the largest prairie of its type remaining in the Chicago area, Wolf Road Prairie is dominated by big bluestem, little bluestem, prairie dropseed and Indian grass. Common forbs include smooth blue aster, sky blue aster, black-eyed Susan, nodding onion, prairie phlox, obedient plant and rattlesnake master, with Indian paintbrush, bottle gentian, prairie gentian and Indian plantain occurring less frequently.

In addition to expanses of prairie habitat, Wolf Road contains a high-quality bulrush-cattail marsh and a small savanna remnant that is dominated by bur oak with wild hyacinth, ground nut and meadow rue beneath the trees.

false foxglove, *Agalinis* sp.

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

beggar's ticks, *Bidens* sp.

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

swamp milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

tiger moth, *Haploa* sp.

tall gayfeather, *Liatris pycnostachya*

eastern bluebirds, *Sialia sialis*

In the 1920s, the prairie was subdivided into nearly 600 lots for housing and commercial development, roads were graded and sidewalks were laid. But, before water and sewer lines could be installed, the Great Depression struck. The lack of utilities, zoning issues and fragmented ownership kept the project from proceeding when the economy improved. Interest in preserving the unique prairie habitat spurred the Save the Prairie Society, a not-for-profit organization chartered in 1975, to start acquiring small parcels in 1980. The Department of Natural Resources and Forest Preserve District of Cook County began jointly acquiring parcels in the 1990s. The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission dedicated a 55.05-acre nature preserve in September 1988. Nearly 125 acres are now preserved, including buffers, purchased with Open Land Trust and Natural Areas Acquisition funds, to protect the watershed and biodiversity of the natural area.

soldier beetle on goldenrod

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

ruby meadowhawk, *Sympetrum rubicundulum*

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

At a glance

Wolf Road Prairie

Telephone: Save the Prairie Society (708) 865-8736; DNR, Natural Heritage Biologist, (630) 553-9164; Forest Preserve District of Cook County (708) 771-1330

Web sites: Save the Prairie Society, www.savetheprairiesociety.org; DNR, www.dnr.state.il.us/INPC/NPdir.htm; Forest Preserve District of Cook County, www.fpdcc.com

Directions: Take the U.S. 34 (Ogden Avenue) exit off I-294 (Tri-state Tollway) and go 0.75 miles on Ogden Avenue to Wolf Road. Take Wolf Road north 1 mile to 31st Street in Westchester. The preserve is north of 31st Street and a ½ block west of Wolf Road. A small parking area is located at the entrance kiosk.

Programs: The Save the Prairie Society offers free programs or guests can wander in at will. The entrance kiosk will contain notices about restoration work, photos and posters illustrating which flowers and grasses are in bloom and a schedule of programs.

milkweed beetle, *Tetraopes* sp.

(Photo By Carol Freeman.)

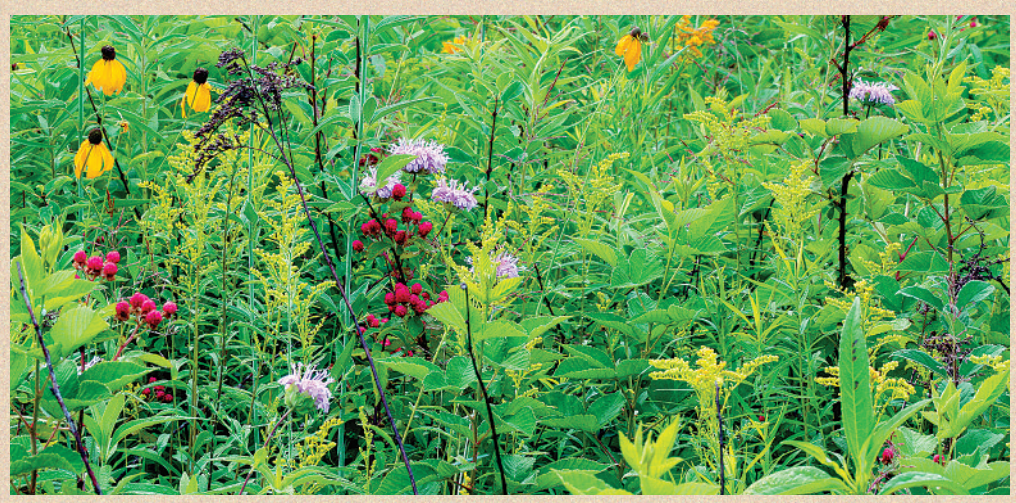
water plantain, *Alisma* sp.

black-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia* sp.

creeping burhead, *Echinodorus cordifolis*

wild rose, *Rosa* sp.

Wolf Road Prairie contains more than 370 documented species of native plants, and more than 140 species of birds can be sighted there throughout the year. Vertebrates recorded at Wolf Road include western chorus frog, fox snake, woodchuck, common snipe and swamp sparrow.



sedge wren, *Cistothorus platensis*

winter wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*