Illinois' nature preserve system—the first such state program in the nation—now permanently protects 500 rare natural areas.

A String of Jewels

The Forest Preserve District organized on Feb. 11, 1915, is the heritage of far-seeing men of Cook County and Illinois who, by legislative act, seek to perpetuate the forests and streams, hills and vales, prairies and fields, for another generation than this. Thousands of acres of forests skirting Cook County shall remain as the red-men left them…our American posterity may benefit by this foresight.

—Plaque on the Deer Grove property

Story by Kathy Andrews
Photos By Steve Byers

June 25, 1916 was a banner day for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

The purchase of a 500-acre tract known as Deer Grove West made history as the Prairie State's first forest preserve, and the "first jewel in a now 68,000 acre emerald necklace of public forest preserves."

Nearly 100 years later, the property again made the record books, this time as Deer Grove West Woodland and Wetland Nature Preserve, Illinois' 500th protected site, a designation bestowed by resolution of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission on May 5, 2009, and signed by Governor Pat Quinn on July 21, 2009.

But wait: The awards ceremony isn't over.

With more sites in the Illinois Nature Preserves System than any other landowner except the state of Illinois, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has become the commission's largest local partner, with the dedication of more than 5,800 acres as nature preserves and the registration of nearly 1,500 acres as land and water reserves.

Established in 1963 as a mechanism for the preservation of significant natural lands, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission oversees the stewardship, management and protection—in perpetuity—of these rare resources. INPC is not a land-owning agency, but provides protection for more than 90,000 acres of private and public land that are located in

On July 21st, Deer Grove West became the 500th site protected by the Illinois Nature Preserves System.

The 1,800-acre Deer Grove site contains diverse habitats.

93 of the state's 102 counties and owned by more than 289 different public agencies, private and nonprofit organizations, corporations, families and individuals.

Located in Palatine in northwest Cook County, Deer Grove West is a 1,800-acre tract which supports savanna, dry-mesic upland forest, mesic upland forest, wet floodplain forest, sedge meadow and wetland communities. Collectively, these habitats support 394 native plant species, including the state-threatened forked aster (*Aster furcatus*), pale vetchling (*Lathryus ochroleucus*), small sundrops (*Oenothera perennis*) and marsh speedwell (*Veronica scutellata*), and the state-endangered bulrush (*Scirpus hattorianus*). State-threatened or endangered wildlife species reported from the site include the black tern (*Chlidonias niger*), yellow-headed blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), cerulean warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) and a reptile.

A large and diverse array of wildlife species have been recorded from the site, including 16 bird species that are either highly or moderately sensitive to forest fragmentation, and 18 species identified in the 2006 "Illinois Wildlife Action Plan" as wildlife in greatest need of conservation (see dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildliferesources/theplan).

On behalf of the nature preserves commissioners, Chair Jill Riddell remarked: "It is fitting that we celebrate the dedication of Illinois' 500th nature preserve during the Burnham Plan's centennial year, for without that remarkable plan Chicagoland's network of Green places would not exist. Not only does Deer Grove's designation honor the legacy, significance and ongoing commitment of the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act, it speaks volumes of the foresight of the early 20th century conservationists who worked so hard to establish the forest preserve districts of Illinois."

Resources

To contact the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, write One Natural Resources Way Springfield, IL 62702-1271 or phone (217) 785-8686.

In 1909, Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett collaborated with the Commercial Club of Chicago and others to create a new plan for the greater Chicago region. The Burnham Plan Centennial celebrates the "Bold Plans and Big Dreams" that shaped metropolitan Chicago for the past century and challenges our region's communities, leaders and institutions to build on the success of the Burnham Plan and act boldly together to shape our future. To learn more about the centennial celebration, visit http://burnhamplan100.uchicago.edu.

What's the difference?

Permanently protected by state law, nature preserves are private and public lands that have rare plants, animals or other unique natural features. Ranging in size from one acre to more than 2,000 acres, nature preserves protect tallgrass prairies, oak groves, sandstone bluffs, wetlands, bogs and other threatened natural areas. Without this protection, many of these exceptional areas would be lost forever. Currently, nature preserves protect more than 900 occurrences of endangered and threatened plants and animals. In fact, more than 20 percent of all Illinois endangered species are in state-dedicated nature preserves. Areas dedicated as nature preserves may be used for activities including hiking, wildlife watching, photography and approved scientific research. Currently, the 47,366 acres dedicated as Illinois 347 nature preserves can be found in 83 counties.

The Land and Water Reserve program, a joint program of INPC and the Department of Natural Resources, was established on May 3, 1994. The program affords temporary or permanent legal protection to ecologically important land while allowing the landowner to conduct many uses on the land as long as the resource is not damaged. Areas registered as land and water reserves may be used for the same activities, as well as fishing, hunting and other approved activities that do not damage the natural features of the protected area. A total of 43,017 acres, in 64 counties and 153 locations, are protected as land and water reserves.

Activities are allowed at nature preserves and land and water reserves only with the permission of each parcel's private or public landowner.

Find a nature preserve near you

For a listing of Illinois' nature preserves, including details on the locations and community types, visit dnr.state.il.us/INPC/NPdir.htm.

Current and former INPC commissoners, advisors and staff were on hand for the historic designation.