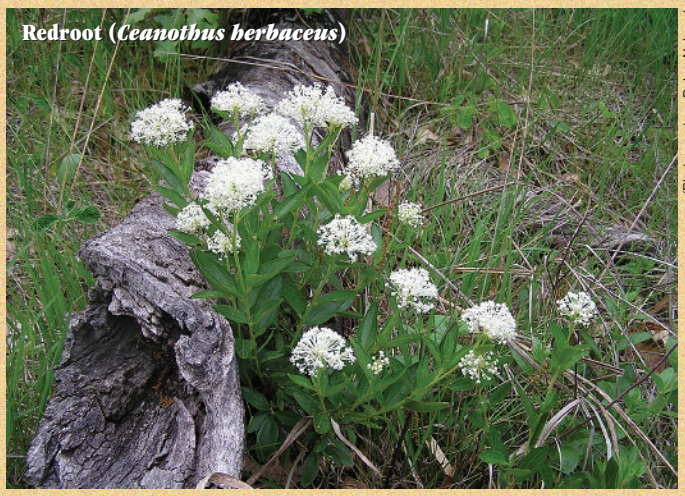
Yes, cacti do grow in the Prairie State.

The Deserts of Illinois

Photos By Michael Jeffords


Redroot (*Ceanothus herbaceus*)

(Photo courtesy Debra Nelson.)

When you think of deserts, you think of sand, cacti and the American West, not Illinois. However, there are large deposits of sand along Lake Michigan and the Mississippi, Illinois, Kankakee and Green rivers where these desert-like habitats are important to more than 70 listed plants and animals. The sand that forms the dunes, sand prairies and wetlands was deposited at the end of the last glacial period, 12,000 to 8,000 years ago. Between 8,000 to 6,000 years ago, many of the rare plants and animals migrated to Illinois from the west during a much warmer and drier climate.

Regal fritillary (*Speyeria idalia*)

(Photo courtesy Susan Dees.)

Each of the sand areas mentioned above has their own characteristic group of endangered species. The Lake Michigan area is home to the Karner blue butterfly (*Lycaeides melissa samuelis*), piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), trailing (*Juniperus horizontalis*) and ground (*J. communis*) junipers, Pitcher's thistle (*Cirsium pitcheri*) and bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), to name a few.

The Kankakee Sands near the Kankakee River provides habitat for the regal fritillary (*Speyeria idalia*), the yellow wild indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*), sweet fern (*Comptonia peregrina*), orange-fringed orchid (*Platanthera ciliaris*) and narrow-leaved sundew (*Drosera intermedia*). Many of these species migrated from eastern populations in the U.S.

Sand habitats of the Green River host the Blanding's (*Emydoidea blandingii*) and Illinois mud (*Kinosternon flavescens*) turtles, Queen-of-the-Prairie (*Filipendual rubra*) and broomrape (*Orobanche ludoviciana*).

(Photo courtesy Michael Jeffords.)

The Illinois River sands are the southernmost deposits in Illinois. They are characterized by the Illinois chorus frog (*Pseudacris streckeri*), Illinois mud turtle, Arogos skipper (*Atrytone arogos*), regal fritillary and silvery bladderpod (*Lesquerella ludoviciana*).

Finally, the sands of the Mississippi River stretch along the northern third of the state. The sand prairies here provide habitat for the upland sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) and western hognose (*Heterodon nasicus*) and lined (*Tropidoclonion lineatum*) snakes. Rare plants found there include the large-flowered beard tongue (*Penstemon grandiflorus*), false heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*), James' clammyweed (*Polanisia jamesii*) and fragile prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia fragilis*).

The "Deserts of Illinois" remain because of their dry nature, and the sand is "forgiving." The conservation of these areas is critical to the endangered species of Illinois.

—**Randy Nyboer**, Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board