Goose Lake Prairie

STATE NATURAL AREA

Illinois
Department of
Natural Resources

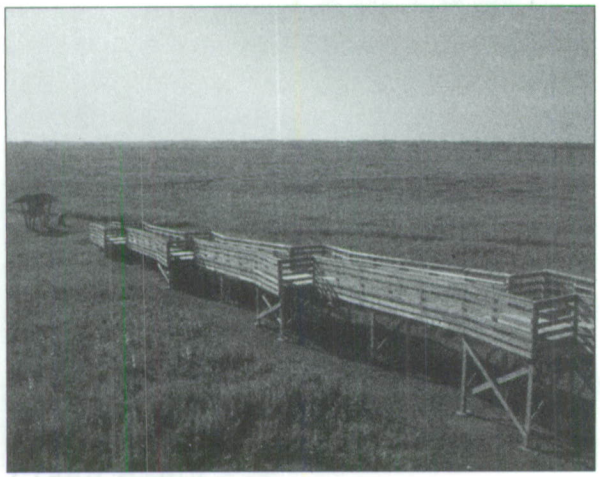
Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area

Early settlers to Illinois, in an attempt to describe the unfamiliar terrain they were encountering, referred to it as "a sea of grass with pretty flowers." Today, Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area serves as testimony to the prairies that once covered nearly 60 percent of the state.

Located in Grundy County, Goose Lake Prairie is approximately 50 miles southwest of Chicago and 1 mile southwest of the confluence of the Kankakee and Des Plaines rivers. More than half of Goose Lake Prairie is a dedicated nature preserve, protected by law for future generations from any change to the natural environment. In addition to furnishing a look into Illinois' past, the prairie provides important nesting habitat for endangered or threatened species of birds, such as the upland sandpiper and Henslow's sparrow.

The Prairie's Past

Goose Lake Prairie was sculpted by glaciers. The flat landscape with its clay-based soils was formed as the last vast sheets of ice melted more than 14,000 years ago. The area became part of a continuous grassland that stretched from Indiana to the Rockies. At one time, well over half of Illinois was covered with prairies, earning it the nickname of "The Prairie State." Goose Lake Prairie, whose original 240 acres were purchased by the state in 1969 and which now totals 2,537 acres, is the largest remnant of prairie left in Illinois.



Buffalo, wolf and prairie chicken once inhabited the area that is now Goose Lake Prairie. Mound-building groups of Native Americans lived northwest of the area in what is now Morris. Tribes of the Illini confederation intermittently inhabited the area, hunting and planting corn, squash and beans. They and other Native Americans, including the Potawatomi led by Chief Shabbona, existed with the land, making few permanent changes. Settlers, relying on the land for their livelihoods, made drastic changes to the area: they planted trees to serve as windbreaks and fences for their farms; in an effort to gain more farmland, they drained the 1,000-acre Goose Lake into non-existence; they removed the underlying clay, first to make pottery and jugs and later for fire brick; they mined coal beginning in the 1820s and in 1928 began strip mining the land.

The Prairie's Present

Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area is a study in contrasts. Tall Grass Nature Trail displays the largest stand of tall grass prairie remaining in Illinois. Marsh Loop Trail shows the ponds and marshes that resulted from the 1890 decision by local farmers to drain Goose Lake. Prairie View Trail takes you to the highest point in Goose Lake Prairie – a strip mine spoil mound – and offers a panoramic view of reclaimed mine areas, prairie and prairie marsh.

Grasses And Flowers

Visiting Goose Lake Prairie today is much like seeing the Prairie State as it was 150 years ago. Tall prairie grasses, including big bluestem, Indian grass and switch grass, make up 60 percent of the prairie. By far the tallest of these is prairie cordgrass, commonly reaching heights of 8 to 12 feet. When you're near 2-foot-tall northern prairie dropseed, you may get the sudden urge to see a movie – its seeds smell like hot buttered popcorn.

Broad-leaved flowering plants, known collectively as forbs, compose the prairie's other 40 percent. Cream false indigo, shooting star and violets are the first to bloom toward the end of April or early May, while New England asters and goldenrod bring up the rear of the colorful display in early September. Autumn is a lovely time on the prairie – some say it's the prettiest season of the year – as prairie cord grass, big bluestem, switch and other grasses turn bronze and gold.

Wildlife

Wildlife sightings are the order of the day at Goose Lake Prairie. Animals living here include deer, coyote, red fox, cottontail rabbit, muskrat, beaver and badger.

Barred owls and red-tailed, Kestrels and marsh hawks are among the birds of prey you may see. Marsh birds such as red-winged blackbirds, kildeer, great blue herons and great egrets might be spotted in the warmer months, while waterfowl species include Canada geese, wood ducks, mallards and blue-winged teals. In addition to the area's year-round inhabitants like ringneck pheasants and northern bobwhites, migrating birds include catbirds, eastern kingbirds and a variety of warblers.

The marsh is home to turtles, snakes and frogs, while butterflies frolic among the flowers each spring and summer. Rare papaipema moths, previously thought to be extinct, have been found here.

Cragg Cabin

A reconstructed cabin at Goose Lake Prairie stands as a monument to the pioneer spirit. The original cabin was built by John and Agnes Cragg in the late 1830s near Mazon, 10 miles to the southwest. A predecessor to a truck stop, the Cragg cabin served as a stop on the old Chicago-Bloomington Teamster Trail. The second story – which was added to accommodate the Cragg's six children, making it one of the first two-story homes in Grundy County – earned the cabin the nickname of "The Palace."

Trails

One of the best ways to experience Goose Lake Prairie is to hit the trails. With 7 miles of hiking trails including a floating bridge, you'll have ample opportunity for viewing the plants and animals that make the area unique.

Prairie View Trail, with 3.5 miles of moderate hiking, goes through prairie and farmland. Visible are strip mine reclamation areas, low-lying marshes and farmland.

Tall Grass Nature Trail is a self-guiding trek that winds through the prairie and the trail's trademark grasses of big bluestem and Indian grass, which can grow to 8 feet in height. Depending on the route you decide to take, the trail can be 1 or 3.5 miles long. One loop offers a hard-packed, wheelchair-accessible surface. The half-mile Marsh Loop Trail is located within the nature preserve and lets you see the effects of a turn-of-the-century attempt to gain more farmland by draining Goose Lake: farmers found the drained land, which remained very wet even after the draining, was suitable only for grazing livestock, and some acreage couldn't even be used for that. Keep in mind that one of the major reasons why Goose Lake Prairie survived was that it was generally far too wet to plant crops on. The marsh here was helped along by the decision to drain the lake, and today is home to all kinds of wetlands wildlife.

Trails are available for cross-country skiing in the winter. Check the visitor center for maps.

Picnicking

Work up an appetite along the trails, then stop for a bite to eat. Tables, grills, shelters, water and toilets are provided at two picnic areas at Goose Lake Prairie.

Visitor Center

Plan on a 30-minute or so stop at the visitor center, and you'll enjoy your visit to Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area just a little bit more. A video will acquaint you with the area, as will the center's nature displays. The park interpreter presents different weekend programs year-round, while multi-media presentations, lectures and guided hikes are also available for groups giving a two-week notice. Groups of 25 or more need to get advance permission to enter the park from the site superintendent.

Heidecke Lake

Adjacent to Goose Lake Prairie is the 2,000-acre Heidecke Lake, a cooling pond for Midwest Generating's Collins Station. The lake, which is managed by the state, offers fishing and hunting. A boat launch is available only for those purposes; water skiing, sailboating, swimming or wading is not allowed. A concession area offering boat rentals is near the boat launch.

For more information contact Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area, Park Office, 5010 N. Jugtown Road, Morris, IL 60450, (815) 942-2899.

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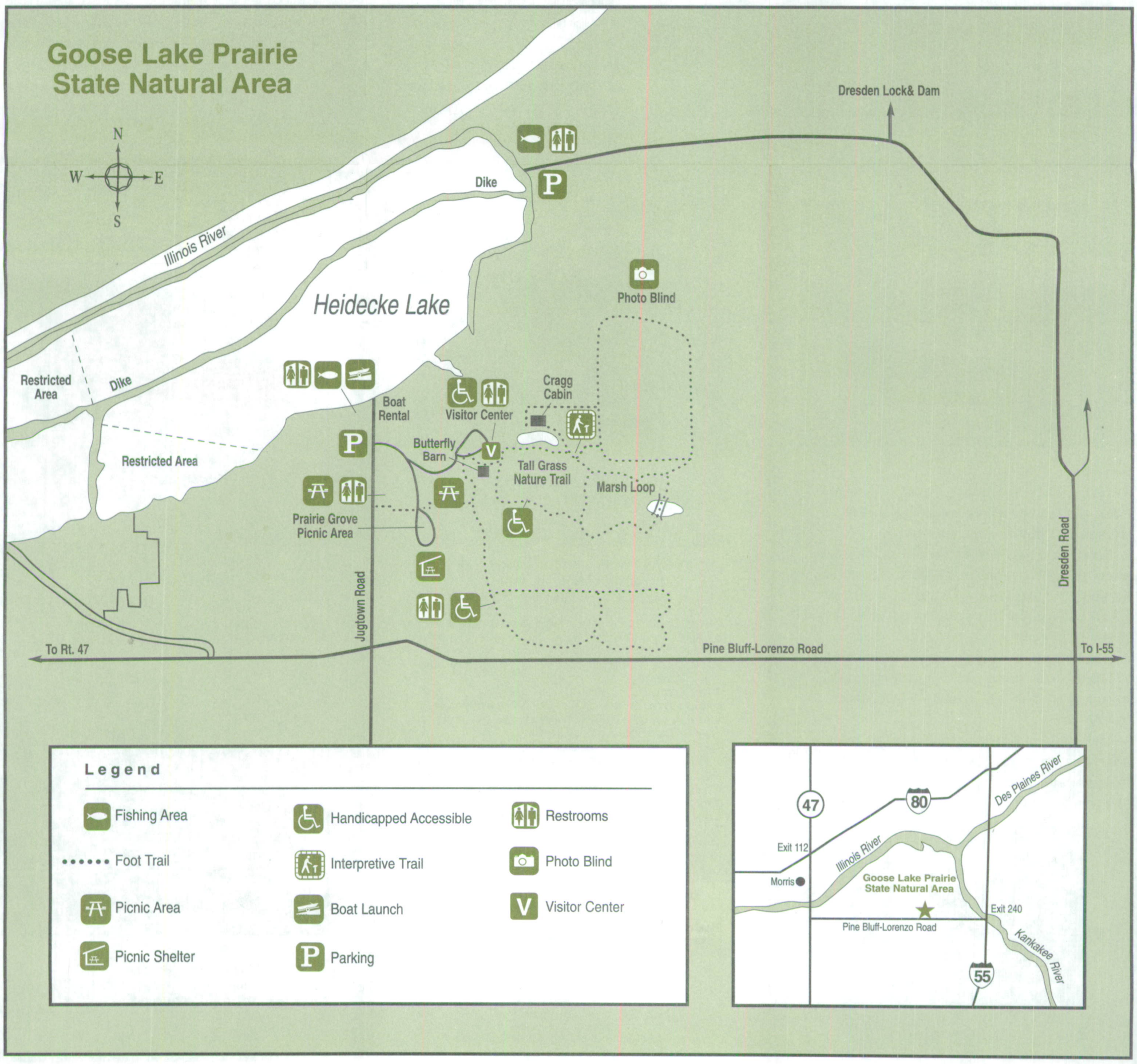

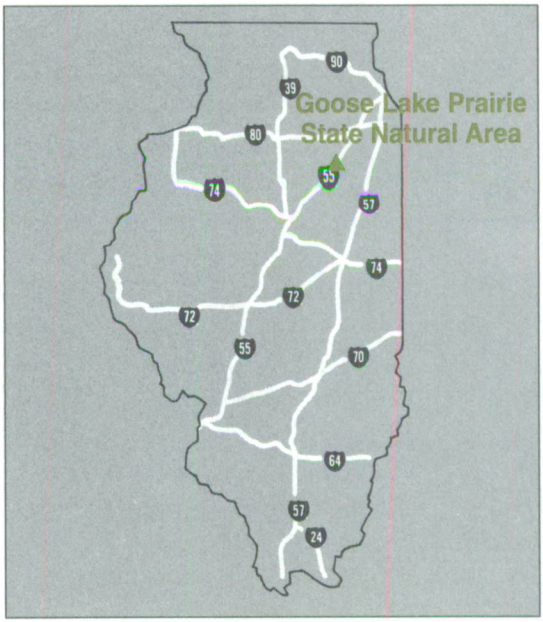

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5010 N. Jugtown Road
Morris, IL 60450, (815) 942-2899

- While groups of 25 or more are welcome and encouraged to use the park's facilities, they are required to register in advance with the site office to avoid crowding or scheduling conflicts.
- At least one responsible adult must accompany each group of 15 minors.
- Pets must be kept on leashes at all times.
- Actions by nature can result in closed roads and other facilities.
- We hope you enjoy your stay. Remember, take only memories, leave only footprints.
- For more information on state parks, write to the Department of Natural Resources, Office of Public Services, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702-1271, call (217) 782-7454 or visit our website at http://dnr.state.il.us.
- For more information on tourism in Illinois, call the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs' Bureau of Tourism at 1-800-2CONNECT.
- Hearing-impaired individuals may call the Department of Natural Resources' TTY number, (217) 782-9175, or use the Ameritech Relay Number, 1-800-526-0844.

Rod R. Blagojevich
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Director

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