

# Trails: Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area

... a study in contrasts.

One of the best ways to experience Goose Lake Prairie is to hit the trails. With 7 miles of hiking trails, you will have many opportunities for viewing the plants, insects and animals that make the area unique.

- Tall Grass Nature Trail displays the largest stand of tall grass prairie remaining in Illinois.
- The Sagashka Trail allows you a chance to contrast the Nature Preserve, restoration area, and marshy areas, which support the waterfowl.
- Prairie View Trail takes you to the highest point in Goose Lake Prairie - a strip mine spoil mound - and offers a panoramic view of prairie and prairie marsh and reclaimed mine areas,

## 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 get to be 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.

## Cragg's Cabin

Walking the trails to the Cabin, you will pass the newly restored Windmill, the covered wagon (which you are welcome to enter and rest), the pond and finally the Cragg Cabin. This is a reproduction of one built in 1834-35 about five miles from here in Mazon. This reproduction is the site of an annual Cabin Festival the first Saturday of June.

## Sagashka Trail

When walking along the Sagashka Trail (*which is a Potawatomi word meaning "grass begins to grow"*) it is possible to contrast many different habitats. There is Nature Preserve, restoration areas, and marshy areas, which support waterfowl.

## Prairie View Trail

With 3.5 miles of moderate hiking, goes along a prairie and through a prairie restoration. As its name implies, Prairie View gives you an overview of the prairie. Visible are strip mine reclamation areas, low-lying marshes. You will also see one power plant outside Goose Lake Prairie's borders to the east. Nearby, Heidecke Lake, once a part of the Collins Plant (no longer in existence) provides hunting and fishing programs which are managed by the state. It did serve as a cooling pond for the Collins Station Plant.

## The Strip Mine Loop Trail

When walking or skiing the Strip Mine Loop trail, it is possible to see the tracks of deer, or coyote next to, or superimposed on the tracks of people. The highlights of this trail are the effort to reclaim strip mined land, and has the highest point in the park.

## Overview

The overview, a strip mine spoil mound, is the highest point in the park. Looking North Northeast the marshes are visible, when Goose Lake was drained, this wetland remained. North and Northeast is the nature preserve. Looking beyond the prairie, Dresden power station can be seen; it is one of the first nuclear plants.

**TRAILS ARE AVAILABLE FOR  
CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING & HIKING  
IN THE WINTER.**

**CHECK THE VISITOR CENTER FOR MAPS.**

**PLEASE STAY ON THE TRAILS**

**MOTORIZED VEHICLES ARE NOT  
ALLOWED ON THE TRAILS.**

**NO BICYCLES.**

For information call: (815) 942-2899

## The Tall Grass Nature Trail Interpretive trail and more

Prairie is an open, TREELESS area, composed of sixty percent grasses and forty percent forbs (flowers). At one time the prairie covered more than sixty percent of the state of Illinois. Tall Grass prairie is so named because of the height of its trademark grasses, Big Bluestem, and Indian. They can reach heights of up to eight feet. The grasses and forbs turn the prairie into a profusion of color from early spring until late fall. Goose Lake Prairie has eight major varieties of prairie grasses and numerous varieties of forbs. The Tall Grass Nature Trail is an introduction to what the Prairie State looked like 150-200 years ago. There is a separate trail guide for this trail.

### What is a Nature Preserve?

A nature preserve is acreage set aside by law to preserve and protect, a specific natural community for future generations to enjoy. At Goose Lake Prairie, the entire Marsh Loop trail is in nature preserve. Nature preserve acreage is managed to maintain natural communities as they appeared in pre-settlement times, and are protected by law from alterations to the natural environment.

### The Lake Bed

By 1890, a decision had been reached by several local farmers to drain the 1,000+ acre Goose Lake. The hope was to reclaim 1,500 acres for farmland. Drainage tiles were laid to the Kankakee River and by 1916, the lake was completely drained. Part of the new drained land stayed very wet and was suitable only for grazing livestock and some acreage not even for that.

During the Wisconsin glaciations, the glacier stagnated forming the lakebed. This stagnation caused more erratic rocks to be dropped here than other areas of the Park and made the land even more difficult to farm. Looking south & Southeast, toward the Marsh, the depression of the lakebed is evident. After crossing the bridge, the trail passes by areas of large glacial erratic rocks and climbs out of the lakebed.

### The Marsh

A marsh is the middle stage in the succession between a lake or a pond, and dry land. In the case of Goose Lake, the process was helped along by a decision to drain the lake. Due to the composition of the soil, the area has become a marsh. A marsh is an area of low-lying wetland. Marshes have emergent (growing out of water) vegetation. This marsh

supports many characteristic marsh plants such as cattails, reeds, and swamp milkweed. The water is important for wildlife such as deer and raccoons. The Great Blue Heron is a constant visitor to the park. In the spring and fall the pelicans can be spotted migrating.

### Geology and the Glaciers

The glaciers sculpted Goose Lake Prairie. As the last ice sheets retreated (or melted), the flat landscape with its clay-based soils was formed. The last glaciation was the Wisconsin Glacier approximately 10,000 years ago.

As the glacier advanced, it wrapped boulders, rocks, and other debris in ice. Traveling inside a glacier, these rocks were carried a great distance. As the glacier retreated, or melted, the rocks were released and left behind. Hidden under the soil or visible on the surface, these boulders and rocks, called erratics, were another reason this area was not plowed.

### Agriculture

Two very diverse groups used Goose Lake Prairie for agriculture. The American Indians and the pioneer settlers viewed the grasslands of Illinois in a very different way. The Native American existed with the land, changing very little permanently. The pioneers changed everything! Both had farming, but on a very different scale. The Native Americans were hunter/gatherers with some farming. The pioneers relied on agriculture for their livelihood, supplementing it with hunting and gathering.

### Restoration Area

Approximately 500 acres of land was farmed after about 1840. Prairie vegetation has been restored to all of this area. The restoration was as accurate as possible without written records. The settlers did not know how to describe what they were seeing, referring to it as a "sea of grass with pretty flowers." The first step in restoring prairie is to plant soybeans in the field for one or two years. The field is held fallow (plowed, but not seeded for 12 months with deep plowing followed by shallow (2 inch deep) disking whenever the weeds cover 70 percent of the field. Native Illinois prairie grass seed is then planted, forbs (or flower) seeds may be added at this time. If the forbs are not planted at the same time as the grasses, a tree planter is used. After the grasses have become established, their roots form such a thick sod that other plants have difficulty becoming established. Upon maturity, the seeds can be harvested to plant in other restoration areas.

### The Prairie & Fire

On the prairie, fire is Nature's vacuum cleaner. Cleansing the prairie of standing dead and non-native plants, the ash residue is returned as potassium, nitrogen, and other nutrients. As the plants have adapted to fire, so have the animals. The mice and moles stay in their burrows until it passes, the larger mammals leave the area, and the birds take wing. Prairie fires move so fast they scarcely heat the ground, and two inches below the ground level, the soil stays cool.

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**ENJOY YOUR VISIT ON THE PRAIRIE.  
STOP IN THE VISITOR'S CENTER AND SAY HELLO.**

Revised by Prairie Partner, 1 2009