

Chicago Area Forest Preserves

Since Illinois is nicknamed the Prairie State, you may be surprised to see forests along the train route close to Chicago. For example, between Willow Springs and Lemont, the train passes through a portion of Cook County's Forest Preserves. Farsighted citizens set aside nature preserves while there was still plenty of land available near Chicago. The preserves have long provided beauty, wildlife habitat and recreation for Chicago residents. These benefits, however, have not occurred without controversy.

In 1869, just 32 years after Chicago was chartered as a city, Dr. John Rauch convinced city leaders to establish a park department to ensure that Chicago was more than just a vibrant commercial center. Indeed, early leaders like Rauch wanted to make sure that Chicago was a healthy and enjoyable place to live. In the ensuing decades, land surrounding Chicago was purchased and set aside as natural areas. Forest Preserve Districts were founded to protect the land from development and provided Chicago and adjoining suburbs a patchwork of green.

Foresters and residents planted both native species and those brought from the East Coast, Europe and elsewhere. Trees grew tall and brush spread across the forest floor. In many areas, non-native shrubs have grown so thick that the woods are impenetrable and poorly suited for supporting native wildlife. Ecologists and forest preserve managers made plans to undertake controlled burning, selective cutting of trees, and removal of shrubs with herbicides in order to restore habitats for such prairie wildlife as turtles, butterflies, bird, badgers and even bison.

In the last 20 years, there has been growing interest in converting land back to prairie ecosystems. The state of Illinois once held over 22 million acres of native prairie, but due to farming, industry, residential development, and fire suppression, only 2000 acres of original prairie land exist today.

If you lived near a forest preserve, would you want it changed into a grassland? Many Chicagoans love the green beauty of trees near their homes and the cooling shade the woodlands provide in summer, and a battle over management of these preserves is raging. Some compromises have been reached – a few areas have been converted to prairies, and some forest lands have been partially cleared to attract native wildlife. Many areas, however, remain choked with non-native shrubs. With this diversity of ecosystems, you have a good chance of spotting deer, squirrels and other wildlife, so enjoy the scenery and keep a sharp lookout!

Source(s):

Forest Preserve District of Cook County, IL. (2009). Retrieved December 11, 2010 from http://www.fpdcc.com/tier3.php?content_id=1 .

Gobster, P.H. & Hull, R.B. (2000). *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Island Press: Washington, DC.

Wikipedia. (2010). *Prairie Restoration*. Retrieved December 11, 2010 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prairie_restoration .

Forest Preserve District of Cook County, IL. (2009). Retrieved December 11, 2010 from http://www.fpdcc.com/tier3.php?content_id=1 .

Gobster, P.H. & Hull, R.B. (2000). *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Island Press: Washington, DC.

Wikipedia. (2010). Prairie Restoration. Retrieved December 11, 2010 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prairie_restoration .

Author(s):

Written by Susan G. Scott (Lecturer) and David Scott (Professor) in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2010.