

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Take a look at the fields outside as the train rolls through Illinois and imagine what the land might have look like 200 years ago. Perhaps from the height of an airplane, the fields would look almost the same as they do today, but from the train's windows we can see monocultures, meaning that each field is carefully managed to grow just one crop. Before Euro-American settlers arrived in the early 1800s, the central part of North America was a tall grass prairie, the wettest type of grassland, composed of numerous tall grass and wildflower species. This rich assortment of plants supported abundant wildlife including hundreds of species of birds, bison, elk, wolves and black bears.

Farmers migrating from the forested hills of the east coast saw great potential in Illinois's rich soil, and in a just a few generations, over 99% of this diverse landscape was converted to agriculture fields, towns and cities. Although still known as the Prairie State, Illinois has less than one hundredth of a percent of its original 21 million acres of prairie remaining.

Many people are apt to believe that a field of corn is better than a field of mixed grasses. Certainly having just one high-yield crop per field is effective for modern agriculture. Herbicides and other procedures remove all plants except the desired crop. Harvest is efficient and the grains can be fed to livestock or processed into food for people. There is a downside, though. Most birds, butterflies, and larger wildlife species which rely on native plants cannot survive in monocultures. Many of these species have either disappeared or are in rapid decline due to loss of habitat.

Of course, we do need to grow food, but many people want to share some land with wildlife as well. An opportunity to provide more prairie habitat arose when the U.S. Military decided to discontinue operations at the Joliet Arsenal in 1994. Over 18,000 acres was designated as the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie – it's the largest piece of protected open space in northeastern Illinois. The name "Midewin" comes from the Potawatomi Native American word for "healing," and in the 15 years since its inception, great strides have been made in reestablishing diverse native plants. Bird species which depend on these plants are rediscovering the improved wildlife habitat.

Midewin Prairie is located about 40 miles southwest of Chicago, between Elwood and Wilmington, Illinois, and is managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Visitors are invited to hike or bike the site, tour the visitor center exhibits, watch birds, volunteer for projects, and hunt for turkey and deer during hunting seasons. Take some time to explore Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie to see the healing in progress, and enjoy the plants and animals which once inhabited nearly all of Illinois.

Source(s):

The Nature Conservancy. (2010). Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Retrieved December 18, 2010 from <http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/illinois/preserves/art27546.html>.

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