



The State of Our Chicago Wilderness: A Report Card on the Health of the Region's Ecosystems

Note: This article is a summary of a report issued by Chicago Wilderness. The report will be the focus of our Thursday, January 11 program meeting at Spring Valley (see calendar of events for more info.) This article is written and published with permission from Chicago Wilderness. For more information on the Chicago Wilderness organization or to view the report in its entirety please visit www.chicagowilderness.org.

All of us make a home in some kind of habitat—A house, an apartment, a condo. We need a good roof over our heads and

it's common sense that our homes can't take care of themselves. So we periodically clean house, weather strip windows, paint wood, fix leaky plumbing and keep furnaces properly serviced. But imagine for a moment if we stopped taking care of our homes. What would happen after a year or so? After 10 years, 25 years or longer? The effects on our health and well-being would not be positive, to say the least. So for most of us, caring for our homes is simply part of our regular routine. What people sometimes don't think about, however, is the need to take

care of the home outside of our houses, apartments, or condos—that is, the need to tend to the larger landscape in which we live.

Our region's remaining woodlands, prairies, wetlands, streams and lakes—the mosaic of more than 225,000 acres of natural areas we call Chicago Wilderness—are home to an astonishing diversity of native plants and animals. And in a larger sense, the natural areas of Chicago Wilderness are also our home. When healthy, they help clean our air, filter our water and provide innumerable opportunities for recreation and respite from the urban world.

Some of our natural areas are in excellent health because they are being actively managed. Good management simply means doing those things for

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Near Clean Sweep for the Environment in Elections

By Barbara Hill

The 2006 general election brought the Sierra Club excellent prospects for advancing the environmental agenda in 2007 and beyond. Dan Kotowski narrowly captured the Illinois Senate seat in Des Plaines and Park Ridge. His will be among a net gain of five pro-environment votes in that body.

Jack Darin, executive director of the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club, predicts that our gains in the state senate will enable passage of legislation to protect wetlands, after years of fruitless effort. Darin is also optimistic that renewable energy will become an issue with legs in the new General Assembly.

New Sierra volunteer Joan Fritz practically made campaign work for Kotowski her full-time job, most likely setting a world record for time donated. She joined Sam Strain, a Sierra organizer, paid from members' PAC donations, in mobilizing other Sierra Club members and spreading the campaign message to the public. Their efforts were rewarded when Kotowski received 51% of the vote to unseat Cheryl Axley. Joan says, "My experience was wonderful. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was a chance to do something for the environment and lift

me from the position of merely ranting to actually making a change for the better."

In Arlington Heights, Palatine, and Barrington Hills, the result was less thrilling. Peter Gutzmer came up with 46% of the vote in his bid for the Illinois Senate against Matt Murphy. Gutzmer's campaign was the second focus of local Sierra Club efforts for the fall election. As in Kotowski's campaign, our volunteers phoned Sierra Club members and other voters and walked door-to-door to talk with voters. Despite the loss, the race was close enough that Gutzmer expects to try again in two years.

Elsewhere in the northwest suburbs, every candidate endorsed by the Sierra Club won re-election. The closest of these contests was Melissa Bean's successful defense of her seat in the U.S. Congress.

Politicians throughout Illinois have become quite aware of our political work and have noticed that we can provide the margin of victory. The Sierra Club placed interns in five campaigns for the state senate in 2006, including Kotowski's. All five races were close, and in all five the candidate endorsed by the Sierra Club won.

Now work to get laws passed that are good for the environment begins.

Prairie Landscaping—No More Mowing!

By Robin Limp

Attending Spring Valley Nature Center's springtime Backyards for Nature Fair on May 6, 2007 is a great way to get started growing native prairie plants in your own yard. Imagine having to mow the lawn only once or twice a year or even not at all! Weeding, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and watering are unnecessary once the plants are established. Plants that are native to this area benefit the environment as well as provide practical ways to save time, resources and energy.

Prairies grow in areas that experience periodic drought, and because their roots are deep prairie grasses can thrive where trees will not. They also keep out other weeds and retain more water. Some are beautifully flowering plants that attract butterflies and provide a haven for birds. They are naturally resistant to pests

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because they have become adapted to the area. They also absorb more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than traditional lawns. The EPA estimates that gasoline lawn equipment on the average produces 5% of ozone-forming VOCs (www.epa.gov/greenacres).

Now is the time to begin investigating the types of native plants that are suitable for your area. The Spring Valley Nature Center, any nearby nursery or your local garden clubs are all good sources of information. Plants purchased at the Backyards for Nature Fair at Spring Valley are discounted if ordered by April 28. The Schaumburg Garden Club website www.schaumburggardenclub.com lists all the plants available for the sale. It has photos and information on optimum growing conditions for native plants. It also has plans for designer gardens such as ones to attract butterflies or rain gardens that reduce run-off and flooding, and filter water before it seeps into our ground water.

Planning Your Garden Take into account the area that will be planted. Is the soil wet or sandy? Will the plants be growing in shade or full sun? Is the area near a tree whose roots would compete with the grasses? Violets, for instance, grow well under the shade of trees. Consider also the height of the plants, the tallest grasses such as Big Bluestem and Indian Grass could grow to 6 feet or more (www.inhs.uiuc.edu). Wildflowers will bloom at different times of the season, so planting a variety can give the yard blooms throughout the growing season.

Sow seeds or buy plants? Seeds are less expensive, but they can take 2–5 years to become established, while plants may bloom the first year. Also consider which plants could become too aggressive and take over an entire area such as Oxeye Sunflower. The EPA designates exotic weeds such as multi-flora rose or purple loosestrife as invasives. The EPA website offers advice on planting as well as recommendations on obtaining permits to landscape natural flora in your community. Information on local ordinances can be obtained by contacting your city hall or searching its website. Schaumburg residents can obtain permits for planting native species as well as for prescribed burning. Spring Valley Nature Center also provides training on burning and can connect you with experts should you decide to burn. Their next training opportunity is Saturday, February 17 from 9 A.M.–2 P.M. You need to register for this free seminar.

Getting Started. Either till the ground in the fall and again in the spring or place newspaper and mulch or a tarp over the existing grass. This will kill the grass so it will be easier to till and the native plants will establish themselves more quickly in this rich soil.

For more information on prairie landscaping go to www.extension.umn.edu. For more information on the Backyards for Nature sale or to obtain order forms call (847)985-2100 or visit www.parkfun.com. Spring Valley Nature Center is located at 1111 E. Schaumburg Road, Schaumburg, IL 60194. South side of Schaumburg Road, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile west of Meacham Road.

From the Chair

By Greg Stolzer

Political change is something that is frequently blowing in the wind, and the November 2006 elections were an excellent example of this. While there is much current optimism, as voters we have to always be aware of what is going on locally, in Springfield, and in Washington D.C. I believe this is a must in order for our political system to operate the way it was intended.

We are never in a position to place our full trust in our elected officials. It is our responsibility to keep them in check as they go about the business of representing our needs. When we take a hands-off approach to politics, we run the risk that our officials will go in directions with which we do not agree.

As a new year begins and new political officials take office we should pledge to stay vigilant in the political happenings of our legislative bodies. We should always keep in mind that we elected them to represent us and it's our right to use the power of the ballot to send them packing when they fail to do the job. We must believe that as individuals our votes count and have real meaning. If we take the cynical view that one vote doesn't mean much then we are destined to cede control of the process to individuals who seek to benefit from the power. And that is certainly something I never want to see.

Thank you for being Sierra Club members. I hope you all had a great 2006 and I wish you luck in 2007.

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nature that nature in an urbanized area can no longer do for itself, such as conducting periodic controlled burns to cleanse our natural areas of the invasive species that force out native plants and animals and reduce the diversity of species in an area. But the majority of our remaining

Humans are part of this magnificent web of life as well. We rely on healthy, living ecosystems for our very existence.

natural areas are not healthy. Many have received little or no management for decades. Others are not protected at all. By working together, we can put things back on course.

Why are so many of our natural areas unhealthy? Before the majority of our region was developed for human use, nature was perfectly capable of taking care of itself. But as farm fields, cities and suburbs increasingly came to dominate the landscape, our woodlands, prairies and wetlands became tiny islands in a sea of development. For example, today, the acreage of high quality natural areas remaining in the entire state of Illinois is less than seven-hundredths of one percent.

Imagine a typical 2,500 square foot home. Seven-hundredths of one percent of this home equals 1.75 square feet. Now imagine this tiny amount of floor space chopped up and scattered throughout the house—that's how fragmented many of our natural areas have become.

What constitutes a healthy natural area? Natural areas are healthy when they support a diversity of native plants and

animals, and when individuals of each species are present in sufficient numbers to reproduce, maintain themselves, and continue to evolve as they have for millions of years. This biological diversity is commonly known as biodiversity.

Humans are part of this magnificent web of life as well. We rely on healthy, living ecosystems for our very existence. They are a virtual pharmacy, providing the source material or blueprint for many of today's medicines. Healthy lakes and rivers provide much of our drinking water. Healthy woodlands and prairies help to cleanse our air of carbon dioxide and other pollutants and release oxygen back into the atmosphere. Healthy wetlands filter pollutants and absorb floodwaters, thereby protecting our homes from flood damage. Healthy natural areas of all types also provide people the chance to balance the challenges of urban life with opportunities to enjoy the natural world.

The State of Our Nature

The Chicago Wilderness consortium convened experts from throughout the region to assess the health of our natural communities. The experts used four rankings to measure each natural community's condition:

- **Poor:** Rapidly losing biodiversity, or little of good quality remains. (Grade: D)
- **Fair:** Quite a bit of biodiversity remains but it is declining, or a moderate amount remains. (Grade: C)
- **Good:** Much biodiversity survives and is fairly stable, but it's not all of high quality. (Grade: B)
- **Excellent:** Much biodiversity survives and is fairly stable and of high quality. (Grade: A)

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Northwest Cook County Group Calendar of Events

Program meetings are held on the second Thursday of the month, September through June, at the Spring Valley Nature Sanctuary at 1111 East Schaumburg Road (west of Meacham Rd. and east of Plum Grove Rd.), in Schaumburg. Meetings start at 7:00 P.M. with refreshments and the program starts at 7:30 P.M. Programs focus on natural history or environmental issues. Our meetings are free and open to the public. For more information about our programs contact Greg Stolzer at greg.stolzer@illinois.sierraclub.org or (847)368-0483.

Also see the Outings section of *Lake & Prairie* and on our website at: <http://illinois.sierraclub.org/NWCook>

Thursday, January 11, 2007

The Health of the Chicago Region's Ecosystems. The report card, created by the biodiversity consortium, Chicago Wilderness, reports on the health of the region's woodlands, wetlands, streams and prairies.

Thursday, February 8, 2007

Environmental Stewardship at Home. Greg Stolzer, group Membership Chair, will lead a discussion on little things you can do around your home and yard to lighten your impact on the environment. Bring your own ideas and we'll work together to practice what we preach as Sierrans.

Thursday, March 8, 2007

Northwest Cook County Group Open House. Come out and learn about our group's outings program as well as the various volunteer opportunities that exist within the group. We will have tables staffed by group volunteers to tell you about what we are doing and to answer your questions.

Thursday, April 12, 2007

Ocean Advocacy. Learn how you can become an ocean advocate and help preserve our oceans. Deanna LaSusa-Hotchner, a volunteer for COOL, Conserve Our Ocean Legacy, will discuss the problems our oceans face today: overfishing, pollution, invasive species, global warming and habitat destruction.

Conservation Workday

Date: Sunday, February 11, 2007

Place: Spring Creek Forest Preserve, "Wichman Road" entrance off Route 72 (Higgins Rd.) just west of Hoffman Estates/Barrington. See directions below.

Time: Meet in parking lot at 12:45, work from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Information: Help us continue our restoration work for Spring Creek Forest Preserve. We will continue to remove the invasive shrub, buckthorn, from the surrounding oaks. Don't worry about the cold—we will have a bonfire going at this event! We'll also have hot cocoa, tea, and hot dogs. Contact Greg Stolzer for more information at greg.stolzer@illinois.sierraclub.org.

Directions: Spring Creek Forest Preserve is north of Interstate 90, west of the Sears complex on Higgins Rd. (Route 72). From New Sutton Rd. (Rte. 59)/W. Higgins Rd. (Rte. 72) the drive is 1.0 mile west on Higgins. Turn right on Wichman Rd. and head north to the parking lot. There is an exit off of I-90 for Rte. 59.

**The following “report card”
assesses the health of our
natural communities.**

Our Wooded Lands: D+. At first glance, many of our wooded lands may look green and healthy. However, with the exception of a handful of sites, which have been a key focus of recent management efforts, most are changing for the worse, with invasive species crowding out native tree species, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers. In particular, non-native honeysuckle, buckthorn and garlic mustard have become scourges of our wooded lands.

Our Prairies: D. Prairies once were the defining feature of our region’s landscape. Today, most of them have been turned into agricultural fields or degraded by past over-grazing, overgrowth by brush and other invasive species, over-browsing by excessive populations of white-tailed deer and changes in hydrology. The few high quality areas that remain represent the largest concentration of high quality sites east of the Mississippi. Yet they are

scattered about in small, isolated pockets and slowly losing quality.

Our Wetlands: D+. In spite of the loss of more than 90 percent of our native wetlands, the Chicago Wilderness region retains one of the most diverse assemblages of wetlands in North America. What wetlands remain suffer from a number of threats, primarily altered hydrology due to intense development and the introduction of invasive species such as purple loosestrife, reed canary grass and common reed.

Our Streams: C-. Historically, our region’s streams ran clear and clean, teeming with fish and other aquatic life. As we began altering the landscape, however, we harvested, polluted and engineered our streams to the point that today, most are in fair to poor condition, although there have been significant improvements in the condition of the upper Illinois River, as well as the Chicago and Calumet Rivers. The remaining good quality streams and rivers lie in outlying watersheds that have not yet suffered the impacts of intense urbanization.

Our Lakes: C. Like our streams, our lakes suffer from the effects of intense

urbanization. Although some isolated glacial kettle lakes are in excellent condition, the majority of our region’s lakes remain in fair to poor condition.

Our Birds: C-. Chicago Wilderness partners have made concerted efforts during the past five years to improve the habitat for grassland bird species, listed of highest conservation concern in the Biodiversity Recovery Plan. The results have been encouraging, but there is still cause for concern, as the small size of local grassland bird populations may not enable those populations to sustain themselves. The same is true of many other local bird populations.

Our Reptiles and Amphibians: C-. Locally, reptile and amphibian species are declining, primarily due to loss of habitat, although they may also be suffering because of pollution.

Our Insects: C-. Of our region’s 5,000 to 6,000 insect species, as many as 1,000 species are considered “conservative,” meaning they require high-quality habitat to survive and are therefore of a conservation concern. These conservative species, many of which are important as pollinators and predators of insects like mosquitoes and ticks, are at considerable risk because of the continued threats to their habitats.

Our Fish: D+. Like other animal species, the health of our native fish species is dependent on the health of their habitat. Although some fish communities appear relatively stable, none are improving, due to ongoing development and alteration of habitat, hydrology and surrounding watersheds.

**With such low grades is there
any good news?**

Yes! The good news has to do with efforts to protect and restore habitat. More than 20,000 acres of lands and waters have been added to our county and township forest preserves and conservation districts in the last several years. Our region boasts a number of individual sites that are well managed and, as a result, are in grade “A” health. Individuals volunteer more than \$1 million worth of their time annually in efforts to restore natural areas and monitor wildlife. With more local governments passing ordinances and development policies aimed at improving protections for habitat and natural areas, our region is evolving into one of the nation’s leaders in sustainable development practices.

Winter Fun at Spring Valley

Spring Valley rents snowshoes during the winter months, when there is at least 4” of snow. Snowshoes can be used on site every day of the week between 9 A.M. and 3 P.M. at a cost of \$3/three-hour rental. Rental by the day is \$6/day and can be taken off-site.

Nature’s Night Life offers adults a perfect way to wind down at the end of the work week. Participants engage in activities and explorations along Spring Valley’s trails and conclude the evening around a campfire with refreshments, readings from selected authors, and informal discussion. Friday, January 19 from 7–9 P.M. and Friday, March 23 from 6–8 P.M. \$7/resident or \$10/non-resident.

An all-ages **Owl Adventure** on Saturday, January 13 from 6–7:30 P.M. includes a walk to search for Spring Valley’s resident screech owls or great-horned owls, some fascinating owl lore and refreshments by the fireplace in the log cabin. \$5/resident or \$6/non-resident.

The **Sugar Bush Fair**, Spring Valley’s most popular event, will be held on Saturday and Sunday, March 17 and 18 from 9 A.M.–12 P.M. A maple syrup boil-down and re-enactments of Native American and frontier sugar camps demonstrate the ancient American tradition of maple sugaring. The highly acclaimed pancake breakfast features real maple syrup and is served under a large enclosed tent. Admission to the event is free; the fee for breakfast is \$4 for a half-stack and \$5 for a full stack (*Note:* discounted breakfast tickets can be purchased in advance and will be available at the end of February).

Pre-registration is encouraged for all Spring Valley programs, since some do fill up quickly. Call Spring Valley at (847)985-2100 for more information.

Spring Valley is located at 1111 E. Schaumburg Road, just west of Meacham Road. For more information, please call (847)985-2100 or visit www.parkfun.com.



Screech Owl