

Nachusa Grasslands

Misty dawn. © Charles Larry

At Nachusa Grasslands, a Nature Conservancy preserve nestled in northwestern Illinois near Franklin Grove, you can step back in time and see what the Prairie State looked like hundreds of years ago. Preserve staff and volunteers have spent more than three decades restoring the preserve's native prairies and oak savannas. In the spring and summer months, black-eyed Susans, coneflowers, and compass plants paint the landscape in purples and golds. Shady oak woodlands provide places for migratory birds to rest and refuel. Meandering streams are filled with the sights and sounds of frogs, turtles, and dragonflies. Together, these habitats make up some of the state's highest-quality prairie, of which only one tenth of one percent remains today.



Nachusa's History

In the 1980s, prairie enthusiasts told Conservancy scientists about a tract of farmland nearly 100 miles west of Chicago. They saw potential in the many remnant prairies and woodlands nestled among corn fields. Conservancy staff recognized that this area offered the best opportunity in the state to restore a large and diverse grassland.

Today, that vision is being realized, thanks to the hard work of Conservancy staff and volunteers who continue to stitch the prairie back together, piece by piece. We work together to identify additional areas with conservation potential, and then raise the funds to purchase them as they became available. Once acquired, staff and volunteers meticulously reconstruct these habitats to resemble the rich grasslands of earlier ages. This restoration requires countless hours of stewardship efforts: from conducting controlled burns in the spring and fall, to monitoring wildlife year-round, to removing non-native species during the growing season, to harvesting thousands of pounds of seed that is used for future prairie plantings and restorations.

What started with one 300-acre purchase has today grown into a thriving grassland that is more than 3,600 acres.

To learn how you can get involved, visit [nature.org/illinois](https://www.nature.org/illinois).

Nachusa By the Numbers

3,600

Total acres

700

Native plant species found on the preserve

180

Species of birds that breed at or migrate through Nachusa

6

Volunteers donate enough hours each year to equal six full-time employees

105

Total number of bison

Achieving Conservation Milestones

The size and quality of Nachusa's lands have allowed the Conservancy to achieve a major conservation milestone: the reintroduction of bison from Wind Cave National Park to the Illinois prairie. Bringing the herd to the preserve constituted the natural next step in the restoration process. Bison help bring diversity to the prairie, as their grazing, the disturbance they create with their hooves, and the wallows they make with their bodies create a mosaic to support a wide array of species. The reintroduction of bison at Nachusa paved the way for other Midwest preserves to start herds, including Kankakee Sands in Indiana and the U.S. Forest Service's Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Climate Change and the Prairie

For Nachusa's lands and wildlife to thrive in the future, the Conservancy and the partners who share our vision are planning to expand the prairie, but acquiring land is just the beginning. Protecting land at Nachusa protects the future of the planet, as prairies store carbon and storm water, thereby helping to mitigate the effects of a changing climate. Every acre in the preserve represents a commitment to actively restoring and maintaining Nachusa's ecological health for both people and nature.

Local Science, Global Results

The successes achieved at Nachusa have an impact across the country and the world. Scientists come to Nachusa to study everything from soils and grasses to insects, mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Their work deepens our understanding of grassland habitats and restoration tactics and knowledge gained in Illinois is shared with restoration and conservation practitioners in other places. For example, bison grazing has the potential to become a preferred conservation strategy for a wide range of lands throughout the Midwest and beyond—and Nachusa is the first demonstration site east of the Mississippi. In this way, research happening right here in Illinois can affect grassland protection efforts far beyond our borders.

Plan Your Visit

On a visit to Nachusa during the warmer part of the year, keep your eyes peeled for the state's largest population of federally-threatened prairie bush clover, along with four other species that are candidates for federal listing: fame flower, Hill's thistle, kittentails, and forked aster. Many other unique native plants survive on the preserve as well, including downy yellow painted cup.

In addition to native plants, you might spot deer, badger, coyote, or endangered Blanding's turtles. Grassland birds, including grasshopper sparrows, dickcissels and Henslow's sparrows, perch in the colorful prairie grasses. You may even catch a glimpse of a prairie icon—the American bison—which returned to the preserve in 2014.



Bison at Coyote Point. © Charles Larry



Nature Conservancy Preserves in Illinois

Hiking at Nachusa

Except for the bison units, the prairie, wetlands, and woods are open to the public every day from dawn until dusk. Trailhead signs are posted at the main trails. You are also encouraged to hike off trail and explore the prairie on your own.

Visitor Center

The Visitor Center helps all ages explore and enjoy the incredible habitats at Nachusa Grasslands. When you arrive at the Center, follow a gentle slope to a pavilion that features exhibits that tell the story of Nachusa. From there you can hike around the Center, or drive to one of five trailheads and explore. For your comfort, the Center features restrooms, a hand pump with potable water, and boulders to climb or sit on to enjoy a view of the prairie.



Nachusa Grasslands Visitor Center
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