

GET "WILD" AT WILDLIFE PRAIRIE STATE PARK

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May/June 2008

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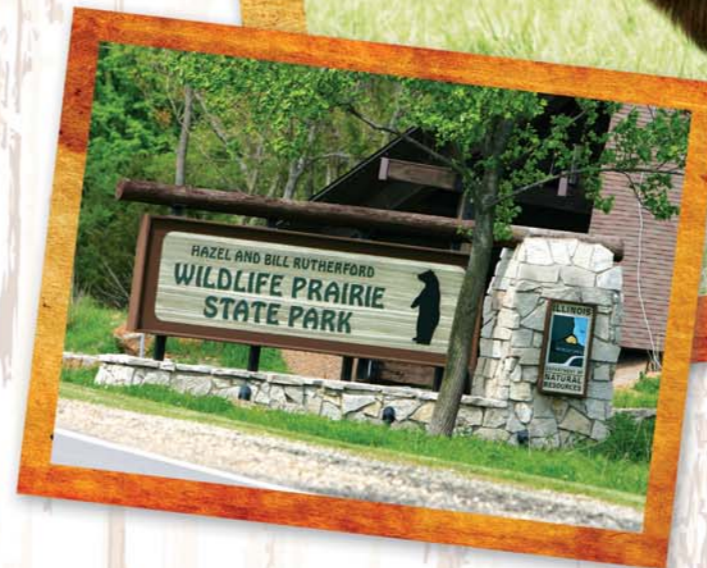
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S T A T E P A R K™



Unique State Park offers a feast for the eyes, and a celebration for the senses

By Amy Kennard

In the heart of the Midwest lies a rare jewel that combines nature, wildlife, history, entertainment and just plain fun, all encompassed in a breathtaking landscape that is sure to delight visitors of any age. Wildlife Prairie State Park is a not-for-profit conservation landmark that celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Just 10 miles west of Peoria, 50 miles northwest of Bloomington and 90 miles north of Springfield, Wildlife Prairie State Park is a daytrip that has been educating and enchanting visitors since the late 1960s.

Established by the Forest Park Foundation with the intention of serving as a breeding farm and rest area for endangered species, the Park evolved into a haven for native Illinois animals in 1978. Founder Bill Rutherford's hard work and dedication resulted in the designation of the park as Hazel and Bill Rutherford's Wildlife Prairie State Park in September, 2000. And this year, Wildlife Prairie State Park is proud to celebrate its 30th anniversary with a virtual stampede of activities and events that are sure to bring visitors from far and wide.

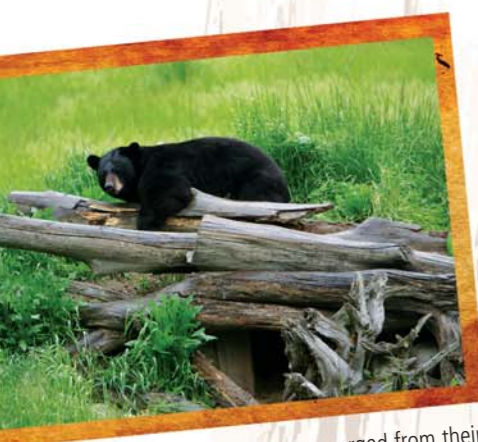
Today, the nearly 2,000-acre facility is home to more than 150 animals representing over 50 species. Approximately 10 miles of walking trails offer countless opportunities to emphasize the Park's mission: to educate about conservation, wildlife and other resources and to provide a place where this can be accomplished by having fun.



Cougars are champion jumpers - some having the ability to leap more than thirty feet!



Spend the night in the wild in this train caboose that sleeps four with all the amenities.



The black bears have emerged from their winter dens and are fascinating to watch in their natural habitat.

Bison, Bobcats and Otters - Oh, My!

Families and groups alike flock to Wildlife Prairie State Park primarily for its namesake – the wildlife. Though most of the animals at the Park are native to Illinois, it’s still a rarity to capture a glimpse of bison roaming through the open plain, an otter racing down its manmade slide, or the giant talons of a bald eagle up close.

Nancy Ream has been with the Park for 16 years and Animal Curator for 3-1/2 years. One of the most common questions she’s asked is, “How do the animals arrive at the Park?” She answers, “Every animal has a story. All of our exhibitor raptors, such as the red-tailed hawks, eagles, great horned owls and barred owls, arrived here due to injuries caused by being shot or as a result of collisions with vehicles or airplanes. Other animals are brought here as orphans, such as our grey fox or coyotes. And some were purchased, like Opie, our male otter, in order to be a mate for our female, Olive.”

Not all the animals at the Park are Illinois natives. Some such as the cattle and sheep are representative of animals that settlers brought with them to Illinois. “This is how we differ most from a zoo that may exhibit non-native animals such as giraffe or elephant,” Nancy explains. “We are fortunate to have the expanse of land for the animals to roam, versus small enclosures. One of our most impressive areas is the bison, elk, and white-tailed deer pasture, which spreads 88 acres and showcases these large herbivores and how they co-exist.”

In Nancy’s opinion, a “don’t-miss” animal attraction is the wolf pack, which inhabits a large enclosure that can be viewed from three angles. “So much has been written about wolves, good and bad, that it’s a wonderful opportunity to educate the public about these amazing creatures. They interact as a pack that is a delight for our visitors to watch.” In addition, on Sunday afternoons, the caretakers host a program where they throw bones to the wolves while a naturalist interprets, answers questions and provides general information.

Visitors this summer will get to see some of the new arrivals as the Park welcomes bison and elk calves in the spring. A very special new resident is a female bobcat born in May 2007 who recently arrived from an Indiana zoo.

Bringing the Outside In

Not all animal attractions are out in the wild – some are in the friendly confines of the Visitors Center. The large center houses a museum focusing on animals and their habitats as well as Native American artifacts. New this year will be a fish tank showcasing native Illinois species such as Illinois’ state fish, the bluegill. Up the road, the Reptile Hall features native reptiles and amphibians on display, as well as hands-on learning activities. Education Director Bonnie Cannon, who has been with the Park for more than 11 years, says, “After putting in the Reptile Hall, we had no idea it would have such mass appeal. The kids love the turtles, and the frogs and other amphibians are always a hit as well. Our venomous reptiles are intriguing to even the most skittish child – we have a Timber Rattler, an Eastern Massasauga and a Copperhead.”

Just off the entrance to the Park is the Train Depot, a popular spot to relax or hop on board the Wildlife Prairie Park train to take a scenic ride through some areas of the Park not otherwise accessible. New at the Depot this year is a museum full of railroad memorabilia. “Kids” of all ages will enjoy looking at the train artifacts and pictures, and the younger engineers will find it a “hoot to toot” a whistle carved to look like a train.

A Step Back in Time

Imagine yourself back in the 1800s. What would your home be like? Where would you go to school? The Park’s Pioneer Cabin and Schoolhouse answer many of those questions. The Cabin features one small room that is filled with antiques from days gone by. Upstairs, a tiny bedroom showcases what living – and sleeping – back then must have been like. This historical gem is currently being restored by the Zeine-Waughop family, whose ancestors once lived there. Outside the cabin, an heirloom vegetable and herb garden and a farm animal petting area delight visitors of all ages. The Graham-Chapel Schoolhouse gives children the opportunity to sit at desks from 1857 and listen to a volunteer recount the school day and lessons from long ago, when boys and girls wrote with chalk on wooden slates and ate lunches of Johnny cakes, home-churned butter and ginger ale.

Open Dates

Hours:

March 1st - April 30th • 9:00am - 4:30pm
May 1st - May 28th • 9:00am - 6:30pm
May 29th - Sept 3rd • 8:00am - 6:30pm
Sept 4th - Sept 30th • 9:00am - 6:30pm
Oct 1st - Dec 14th • 9:00am - 4:30pm

Admission:

Please be aware that pets are not permitted within the park. General Admission (April - October)

Ages 13 & up - \$5.50
Ages 4-12 - \$3.50
3 & Under - FREE
Park Members – FREE*

*Yearly park memberships are available for as low as \$40, and include free admission to the park, special member discounts on park programs, lodging, Sunday brunch and Gift Shop purchases, advanced registration for special programs, and a subscription to the Park’s newsletter, The Outlook.

To Understand, Appreciate and Inspire

Perhaps almost as prevalent as the animals are the fun, educational opportunities at the Park. Year-round monthly groups like the Knee-High Naturalists (ages 2-4) and Junior Explorers (ages 5-7) get children up close and personal with animals while they learn about their development, living habits and characteristics that make each of them special. In addition, kids learn some history of Illinois and touch on important topics such as recycling, conservation and pollution, all taught in a kid-friendly environment featuring games, crafts, and other hands-on learning. As the education director, Bonnie says, “Educating anyone,

particularly children, is not about just giving the facts. We realize that just giving information to people isn’t as exciting for them as being able to see and touch things. If we can involve the children completely in the program, we can teach them something that they will hear and retain.”

They also offer opportunities for Boy and Girl Scout troops to attend structured curriculum to earn various merit badges. Their summer youth programs give teens 13-18 years old with an interest in biology or animal care the chance to do a day of career exploration as they help care for some of the park animals. Day camps, also held during the summer months, offer kids ages 6-11 the chance to learn, grow and expend some energy in the fresh air.

Daily, the Park offers naturalist programs throughout the season that are free, informative and enable visitors to learn more about a specific animal while seeing it up close and personal. Bonnie feels lucky to be able to see the enjoyment that comes from these programs. “The wide-eyed expression of a child as an owl flies silently across the audience is a priceless moment. Not only have you taught that child something about nature, but you’ve allowed him or her to experience it first-hand as well.”

Mark Your Calendars!

In addition to the daily, weekly and monthly events, Wildlife Prairie State Park offers a number of program and special events throughout their season. Fishing fans young and old will be happy to know that public fishing is available at designated lakes within the park as of April 1. Anglers will have the opportunity to snag channel catfish, large or smallmouth bass, bluegill, redear sunfish, crappie and muskellunge from shore or portable boat.

For aspiring and seasoned photographers alike, the park is featuring a new

AD

Be sure to visit the newly renovated Gollywhopper Playground – home of the 56-foot sliding board!

Calendar

May

3 – Boy Scout Merit Badge Day “Fish and Wildlife Management” (10am - 4pm) – Cost: \$22 per person, \$17 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required.

3 – Junior Explorers “Animal Babies” (1pm - 3pm) – Cost: \$5 per child, plus General Admission, \$4 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required.

4 – Art in the Park (9am - 4:30pm) – On the first Sunday of each month we will have local artisans demonstrating and selling their crafts in the park. This month will feature the photography of Ron Zimmerman.

10 – International Migratory Bird Day (7am – 12 noon) – Celebrate migration and learn how to identify birds common to our area by taking a bird ID hike at 7am or 11am. General admission rates apply.

10 – Photo Tour (time will vary) – Tour the park with a photographer and get great tips on how to achieve that perfect shot. Photos taken may be submitted into our monthly photo contest. For tour details, please call the Park or visit us on the web. FREE to the public with paid admission.

10 – Junior Girl Scout Badge Day “Pet Care” (10am - 2pm) – Participants will need to provide their own lunch. Cost: \$15 per person, \$10 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required.

10 & 11 – Rock, Reptile & Aquatics Show (10am - 4pm) – Have a “smashing” good time that is sure to make your skin “crawl”! Join area rock, reptile and aquatic experts for displays, demonstrations, dealers and more. General admission rates apply.

11 – Mother’s Day Brunch (9:30am - 2:30pm) – Mom deserves a day off. Why not show her your appreciation with a delicious brunch buffet! Buffet selections include breakfast foods, an omelet station, fresh made waffles, fresh carved meats, garden fresh salads, homemade pastries/desserts and more. Limited seating is available. Reservations are required!

17 – Armed Forces Day – Member and family receive free admission into the Park.

24 – Photo Contest – Have you recently take a great shot of something at the Park? Well, submit it into our monthly photo contest and you may see it posted on our website for an entire month. The winner will also win a one-year membership to the Park. Submissions must be received by the last Saturday of the month to be judged. Please visit the website for details.

26 – FREE Public Programs Run Daily – Free to the public with paid admission. Programs will be available daily through Labor Day.

31 – Becoming an Outdoor Family – Register to participate in a day filled with information on family camping. Learn how to have fun and keep it safe for the whole family.

June

5 – Raptor Handling Course – Class I (8am - 12pm) – Advance registration for all four classes required. Please contact the Education Department for additional information.

7 – Junior Explorers “Super Swimmers” (1pm - 3pm) – Cost: \$5 per child, plus General Admission, \$4 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required.

8 – Art in the Park (9am - 4:30pm) – On the first Sunday of each month we will have local artisans demonstrating and selling their crafts in the park. This month will feature the music and photography of Joe Couri.

9 – Keeper for a Day (8am - 12noon) – This is the perfect opportunity for teens ages 13-18 to explore a career in animal care. Cost: \$25 per person or \$20 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required. (An Adult Keeper for a Day program is also available and must be scheduled through the animal department. The cost for adults is \$65 per person or \$50 for Park members.)

12 – Raptor Handling Course – Class II (8am - 12pm) – Advance registration for all four classes required.

14 – Photo Tour (time will vary) – Tour the park with a photographer and get great tips on how to achieve that perfect shot. Photos taken may be submitted into our monthly photo contest. For tour details, please call the Park or visit us on the web. FREE to the public with paid admission.

14 – Junior Girl Scout Badge Day “Water Wonders” (10am - 2pm) – Participants will need to provide their own lunch. Cost: \$15 per person, \$10 for Park members. Advance payment and registration required.

14 – Urban Fishing Derby Day (11am - 4pm) – Learn to tie knots, bait a hook, catch & release, as well as participate in the hands on exploration of aquatic animals and so much more! There will be fishing derby prizes for the largest fish, smallest fish, the most fish caught, etc. Attendees will need to bring their own lunch. Advance registration is required. Check-in at the Parkside Pavilion will begin at 10:30am. FREE.

14 – Boy Scout Merit Badge Day “Fishing” (11am - 4pm) – Please refer to the FREE Urban Fishing Derby Day listed above for details.

5 – Father’s Day Brunch (9:30am - 2:30pm) – Drag Dad off the couch and bring him to a brunch sure to please even the hardest of appetites! Buffet selections include breakfast foods, an omelet station, fresh made waffles, fresh carved meats, garden fresh salads, homemade pastries/desserts and more. Limited seating is available. Reservations are required!

16-20 – Day Camp for Ages 6-12 (8am - 12pm & 12:30pm - 4:30pm) – Kids will enjoy a day outdoors learning about native Illinois animals. The cost for each half-day session is \$18 per child or \$15 for Park members. Sign up for two same-day sessions and receive a \$5 discount. Advance payment and registration required. See website for schedule.

19 – Raptor Handling Course – Class III (8am - 12pm) – Advance registration for all four classes required.

24 & 25 – Knee High Naturalists “Don’t Bug Me” (10am - 11:30am) – Cost: \$5 per child, plus applicable General Admission, \$4 for Park Members. Advance payment and registration for either Tuesday or Wednesday is required.

26 – Raptor Handling Course – Class IV (8am - 12pm) – Advance registration for all four classes required.

27 & 28 – Prairie Ala Carte (Fri: 5pm - 10pm / Sat: 11am - 8pm) – Free to the public with paid admission. Savor the flavors of Central Illinois. Enjoy food and wine at its finest while listening to local musicians.

28 – Photo Contest – Have you recently take a great shot of something at the Park? Well, submit it into our monthly photo contest and you may see it posted on the Park’s website for an entire month. The winner will also win a one-year Membership to the Park. Submissions must be received by the last Saturday of the month to be judged. Please visit the website for details.

program this year – a monthly photo contest. On the second Saturday of the month, photographers 18 years and older will have the opportunity to tour an area of the park with a guest photographer. The favorite shots can then be submitted to the photo contest, with the winner receiving a one year membership to the Park as well as the opportunity to have his or her photo featured for a month on the Park’s website.

There’s no better place to be around Halloween than Wildlife Scary Park! Held for two weekends in October, this popular event features trick or treating, a haunted fun house, a spooky train ride through the forest, and a souvenir family photo. For the faint of heart, the hours of 5-7 pm are specially designated as “not so scary”. So put on your costume and experience the spooks of the wild!

Enjoy Sunday brunch like you’ve never experienced overlooking the beautiful landscape and watch native animals roaming through their habitats. Wildlife Prairie State Park offers this special family meal most Sundays during the season. The mid-day feast includes a waffle station, an omelet station, salad bar, breakfast and

lunch entrees and a dessert table. Reservations are highly recommended for this popular meal.

Other annual events include a Wildlife Rendezvous in June, featuring demonstrations in crafting of the early settlers, rifle firing demonstrations, knife and tomahawk throwing and more. Tap in to your inner energy at the Wellness Weekend in July, featuring wellness products and holistic approaches such as massage therapy, acupuncture, relaxation, and food and fitness demonstrations. Check out even more events on Wildlife Prairie State Park’s new website at www.wildlifeprairiestatepark.org.

Wildlife at Night –ALL Night!

If you can’t get enough of the Park during the day, why not spend the night? More and more families are taking advantage of this unique opportunity to become one with nature in one of the Parks’ unique lodging accommodations. The Cabin on the Hill sleeps four comfortably and offers a breathtaking view of the bison range. For those who like to ride the rails, two train cabooses have been

transformed into sleeping rooms complete with bunk beds and a view of the bison and elk range. The Cottages by the Lake are eclectic structures that were built from recycled grain bins that date back to World War II, and are perfect for relaxing and bird watching. The Prairie Stables mirror the old horse barns of yesteryear, but include modern accommodations and a semi-private patio. All include bathrooms with showers, and some are available year-round. The costs include a two-day park admission, bank fishing and the use of the park’s recreation room.

Something for Everyone, a Treasure for All

Wildlife Prairie State Park is truly one of Illinois’ best-kept secrets, one that they are certainly willing to share. With its miles of hiking trails, varieties of native plants and animals, educational opportunities and fun activities for individuals and families, the Park truly shines as a gem among gems in Central Illinois. ▼

PARADISE