Caring for Nature
with Impact

Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves
2021 Annual Report
We’re on the way! Hundreds of us are changing “The Prairie State” – dramatically for the better.

Friends resources and volunteers made major and influential improvements in the health and status of several deserving Nature Preserves. Growing communities of support are the nucleus of new energy and constituency for Illinois Nature Preserves.

One result of that new energy was the hiring of Todd Strole as Executive Director for the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission – after an unacceptable six years with no director and shrinking resources. The most important biodiversity in our state deserves funding, staff, and Friends. This hiring marks a new beginning.

September brought the unexpected and shocking news of the imminent destruction of Bell Bowl Prairie, a one-of-a-kind high-quality prairie remnant in Rockford that should long ago have been protected. We helped assemble and lead an emergency response coalition. We supported a passionate team of media-savvy activists, and we raised awareness across the state and pushed for action by our Governor, Senators, local representatives, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Together, we temporarily stopped the bulldozers – with just days to spare. Our coalition seeks permanent protection of this important site in 2022.

October featured well-attended stewardship community kick-offs at Shaw Woods and Prairie in Lake County, Kishwaukee Fen in McHenry County, and the Old Plank Road Prairies in Cook County. Paramount to the Friends’ mission, new and experienced volunteers came together at these sites and began fostering the culture of learning and stewardship needed for the future of biodiversity conservation in Illinois.

In November we did the same for Fults Hill Prairie in Monroe County. This first Friends stewardship community in southern Illinois has adopted a prairie now less than half its original size. Scientists and volunteer leaders tell us that, for sustainability of plant and animal populations, this Nature Preserve deserves brush control for full restoration.

The Friends—you and many others—are doing this.

Whether it is sounding the alarm, inspiring new connections, or getting hands dirty – hundreds of energetic new volunteers have risen to the occasion. As a Friend of Illinois Nature Preserves, you are part of a hardworking, creative team. Through your support we can celebrate the stories, challenges, and triumphs of all Illinois Nature Preserves. We anticipate more such trials, victories, and growing numbers of Friends in 2022!

Warmest regards,

Matt Evans
Board President

Amy Doll
Director
Looking Forward to 2022

The 50th anniversary of Heron Pond Nature Preserve. A celebration jointly sponsored by Friends, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and Friends of the Cache River Watershed on April 9th!

Growing the network of Nature Preserve stewards. We aim to bring the “work-learn-lead” community stewardship model to more sites and more parts of the state in 2022.

Working with the new Nature Preserves director on setting priorities. After a six-year vacancy, there is work cut out for Todd Strole and the Commission in 2022 – we will help.

Getting the word out. We’ve been invited to present on the Friends’ vision to the Illinois Park and Recreation Association, Northeast Illinois Sierra Club, Northwest Illinois Audubon, Prairie State Conservation Coalition, Prairie Preservation Society, and many others. Want us to speak to your organization? Contact Amy at amy@friendsilnature.org to see how we can make it happen.

Building a powerful, statewide board. Reach out to Amy at amy@friendsilnature.org if you think you might be able to help.

Save Bell Bowl Prairie. The miraculous reprieve for Bell Bowl Prairie is scheduled to end this spring. We still have major advocacy work to do before this ancient prairie is permanently protected as the dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve it ought to be. Learn more at savebellbowlprairie.org.

Wild Things 2023. The Friends are excited to provide the staff support for next year’s premier conference for nature-lovers in Illinois and beyond. Let Katie know if you have any ideas for this at katie@friendsilnature.org.

60th anniversary of the Nature Preserve System. The System turns 60 next year – we Friends will celebrate and educate!
Middlefork Savanna is one of the highest-quality original tallgrass savannas in the state and now proudly hosts weekly days of stewardship with regular volunteers. Volunteers have taken on all aspects of ecological restoration: seeds, herbicide, ecological monitoring, shade removal, and prescribed burning. Birds and people flock to this large site to enjoy ancient oaks and tall grass. This summer, the volunteer stewards led one of the Illinois Native Plant Society Northeast Chapter’s summer field trips at the site.

In June, Friends alerted Oakwood Hills village officials and partnered with the village, neighbors and scouts to clean up death-dealing landscape waste dumped on a 80 × 25-foot-wide strip at the Nature preserve’s south edge, smothering rare Grade-A fen. The team cleaned up a dumpster-load of this waste and rescued the rare fen plants from impending demise.

Kishwaukee Fen

Illinois Nature Preserves Commission representative John Nelson brought this site to our attention, saying it could use help. Soon, Kishwaukee Fen began growing a stewardship community with support from its owner, the Village of Lakewood, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, INPC, and the Friends. This four-way partnership organized a stewardship kick-off on October 17th attended by over 30 local people. Throughout the fall and winter, volunteers met twice monthly to clear invasive brush from the site’s two hanging fens, three raised fens, sedge meadow, and prairie. Dead zones under the brush have been planted with local seed generously donated by local eco-group Citizens for Conservation, en route to restoring the original health and beauty of the fen.

Bell Bowl Prairie

September brought shocking news that Bell Bowl Prairie – a Grade A-quality Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site and home to the federally-endangered rusty-patched bumblebee – was slated for imminent destruction due to expansion of the Rockford Airport. Together with the Natural Land Institute, Sinnissippi Audubon, the Illinois Environmental Council, and dozens of passionate citizen-advocates from across Illinois, the Friends helped lead a last-minute charge that saved the prairie from destruction...until spring. We still have major advocacy work to do before Bell Bowl Prairie is permanently protected as the dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve it ought to be.

Somme Prairie Grove

Somme Prairie Grove is a diverse 85-acre tallgrass savanna home to hundreds of species of plants and animals, 18 of which are species of greatest conservation need in Illinois. Once a derelict and weedy preserve, thousands of hands and decades of loving and thoughtful stewardship have brought back the amazing richness that can be seen there today. In recognition of this great success story, this past summer Somme Prairie Grove was officially dedicated as one of Illinois’ newest Nature Preserves – making it the first restored tallgrass savanna to receive that distinction. Continuing the restoration, this fall the Friends of the Somme Preserves prepared 384 gallons of rare, local genotype seed mix from 301 different species of plants, which were broadcast in Somme’s prairies, savannas, and woodlands as well as nearly a dozen other nearby restoration areas supported by the North Branch Restoration Project.

Shaw Woods and Prairie

To nurture an already impressive legacy of stewardship, Lake Forest Open Lands Association tapped the Friends’ expertise in fostering a new stewards community to increase top-quality care for the 134-acre Skokie River Nature Preserve. This rich prairie-savanna-woodland complex is one of the most important such remnants in the state. The group that emerged from October’s 60+ person kick-off now call themselves the Shaw Prairie Stewards and meet every week to tackle brush and gather seeds to expand the small, high-quality areas of the larger Skokie River Nature Preserve.

Middlefork Savanna

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Oakwood Hills Fen

In June, Friends alerted Oakwood Hills village officials and partnered with the village, neighbors and scouts to clean up death-dealing landscape waste dumped on a 80 × 25-foot-wide strip at the Nature preserve’s south edge, smothering rare Grade-A fen. The team cleaned up a dumpster-load of this waste and rescued the rare fen plants from impending demise.
Expert care for Short Pioneer Cemetery – the Friends’ inaugural community stewardship site in 2019 – continued into its third winter. The growing community at Short has made excellent progress in removing some of the very large invading trees that had cast deadly shade on the east, south, and west sides of the preserve. Skilled volunteers harvested and planted priceless, local seeds and lead prescribed burns for the third year in a row, bringing healing to disrupted areas. Several species such as purple prairie clover, prairie dock, and prairie cinquefoil that had been lost from the site due to shade were reintroduced in this year’s seed mix from nearby populations.

The Friends helped Nature Preserve staff develop a much-needed management plan update for the Plank Road Prairies with the Village of Matteson and Rich Township. All jointly sponsored a new volunteer stewards kick-off in October, attended by more than 40 people. Jointly with partners from the Orland Grassland Volunteers, and The Nature Conservancy’s Indian Boundary Prairies, we got those prairies their needed burns – using the Friends new prescribed burn tools and safety duds. A supportive private donor helped the Old Plank Road Prairie Stewards purchase their first tools. And in response to renewed public interest, good neighbors like the South Suburban Humane Society and a nearby Amazon facility generously offered to provide and equip a tool shed for the Plank Road Stewards.

After receiving a call for help from Illinois Nature Preserves Commission staff and preserve owner I&M Canal Civic Center Authority, the Friends quickly organized a prescribed burn at this historically significant site in the spring and helped organize brush-cutting throughout the year. Santa Fe Prairie is one of the last few gravel prairie remnants left in northeast Illinois. In July, the Friends and expert local botanists jointly conducted a plant survey that compared changes to the site that have occurred since previous surveys were conducted in 1976, 1998, 2003, and 2005. These surveys are a crucial first step that will help guide this damaged Nature Preserve’s long road ahead toward health and sustainability.

The Friends helped revive a dormant volunteer effort to restore this unique island ecosystem. Under the weekly care of the Friends of Langham Island, the world’s only natural population of Kankakee mallow gained over 300 newly-recorded individual plants. To restore the mallow’s savanna habitat, Langham volunteers cleared invasive honeysuckle, thinned pole trees, and protected baby oaks from beavers by placing cages on them. They also collected and spread 12 gallons of rare, local seed on bare ground in the areas cleared of dense brush. A total of zero ankles have been sprained traversing the island’s steep slopes.

In the festive spirit of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ spectacular 50th anniversary celebration, the Friends hosted our first-ever volunteer stewardship kick-off day in southern Illinois at Fults Hill Prairie. Facilitated by Friends field rep Travis Neal, this new community has begun tackling invasive brush and trees that have hemmed in this worthy prairie of rare beauty. In addition, the Fults Hill Prairie team is already “fired up” to join regional IDNR burn crews in their important work, and partnered with a local Neighborhood Co-op to fundraise for the prairie’s cause.
We Celebrate, Learn, & Advocate Together

In addition to “boots on the ground” stewardship, celebrating, educating others about, and advocating for the Nature Preserves are all key parts of the Friends’ strategy and mission. Some highlights from 2021 include:

**Celebration**

**Fults Hill Prairie** was dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve in October 1970. COVID-19 kept the anniversary from being celebrated in 2020, but on October 9, 2021, this preserve got a much deserved celebration. The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves, and Clifftop held a ceremony on a gorgeous day that included presentations, tours by past and present staff and, of course, a very big cake.

Education and Outreach

**Oakwood Hills Nature Preserve**: In June, Friends gave a presentation to the Oakwood Hills Park, Beach, and Fen Committee, talking with these government officials about the value of their precious natural area and the care that it needed.

**Old Plank Road Prairies**: Changing of the guard among elected officials and staff at the Village of Matteson and Rich Township meant that many of these Nature Preserve landowner representatives weren’t familiar with their ancient prairies. Friends hosted in-person walks with the elected officials and leaders from the Village and Township in August. These were followed by presentations to the Old Plank Road Trail Commission and the Village of Matteson Parks and Recreation Commission.

More outreach: Thinking together with community members throughout the state about why Nature Preserves are special and deserving of care has been an important part of our work this year. In addition to creating a Guide to Common Volunteer-Led Stewardship Activities, the Friends spoke at the Wild Things Conference (February), Kankakee Green Drinks (June), Peoria Wild Ones (July), DeKalb Kiwanis Club (October), and the Heineman Middle School Service Club (November).

**Advocacy Brings Change**

Nature Preserves Director: For six years, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission lacked an Executive Director, a keystone position that is critical to a thriving Nature Preserve System. The System lacked a dedicated and effective constituency. This is one of the many reasons why the Friends formed.

We look forward to working closely with newly hired Todd Strole on upgrading the Nature Preserves System’s resources and influence.

Many of us were shocked and surprised when we found out that Bell Bowl Prairie was in immediate danger of being bulldozed. We helped lead the team that got the prairie spared… until this spring.

Together, our coalition exposed serious flaws in the environmental consultation process that allowed the threat to Bell Bowl Prairie to reach this level. These flaws in the system need to be addressed as soon as possible before a similar situation can arise again. In the short term, we are pulling out all the stops and hope that Governor Pritzker, like Governors Shapiro, Thompson, and Edgar before him (at Castle Rock and the Savanna Army Depot) will recognize that destroying this important site is unpopular and shortsighted, and take action to save it. Your letter to him could help the Governor use his outsize influence to intercede on the prairie’s behalf. The Friends are committed to a win-win solution for the Airport and the Prairie. Stay up to date so you know how you can help by joining the Save Bell Bowl Prairie group on Facebook and checking savebellbowlprairie.org.

Friends in the News

- WBEZ Chicago story - [Illinois’ 596 Nature Preserves Need More Than Protection From Development To Thrive](https://www.wbez.org/illinois-596-nature-preserves-need-more-than-protection-from-development-to-thrive), January 6, 2021
- Metropolis Planet article - [Friends Of Illinois Nature Preserves hires field organizer for southern Illinois](https://metropolisplanet.com/friends-of-illinois-nature-preservation-system-hires-senior-field-organizer-for-southern-ilinois), September 27, 2021
How You Can Help

On receiving $20,000 in funding from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, we needed to match their generous grant through our own fundraising efforts. Because of Friends like you, we have not only met, but exceeded this goal – for which we are humbly grateful.

But Friends is still a young organization with big needs. Most of the 613 Illinois Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves need vastly more care than they’re getting. We are well poised to continue being catalysts for more and more successes. We’re seeking to fund new site initiatives and critical staff for regions that don’t have it. We have begun surveying the preserves for needs and threats.

If you’re able to, here are just a few of the ways you can help...

Shop for the Friends!
Visit friendsofillinoisnaturepreserves.org and access our Amazon wish list – you can purchase and ship items directly to us.

Set up a recurring donation.
Just reach out to our Administrative Manager Katie Kucera at katie@friendsilnature.org and she can help you set up monthly or annual gifts in any amount you wish.

Volunteer.
Many skills are needed to make this enterprise work, both in the field and at the desk. Let us know how you think you might be able to help!

Bequest.
Please let us know if you’re considering including Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves in your estate plans – this helps us plan, and allows us to say “Thank You!”

Donors

$20,000
Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation

$5,000 or more
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Our Mission

To support and promote the Illinois Nature Preserve System and its world-class biodiversity and conservation values.

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Mark Kluge
Eriko Kojima
Emma Leavens
Linda Masters
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