

Trailside Wildflower Guide 6
The Fall Flora
September and October

Introducing some of the prairie and savanna species at Somme Prairie Grove.

Take a hike with this trail guide and see if you find this a happy way to learn the **wildflowers and grasses** that you'll find at points marked on the map. You may see these same species at many places in this diverse preserve, but they should be especially easy to find at the numbered stations. Keep track of where you are by watching for features on the map such as groves of trees, trail intersections, and wet areas (with log bridges). It may be easier and more rewarding if you bring along a plant identification book (such as those listed at the end of this guide). In early fall you'll also see many species flowering that were covered in Guide 4, so you could bring that as well, if you may have forgotten a species or two.

1. As you enter the open savanna, look for two grassland goldenrods, **Gray goldenrod** is just knee high; it has a pointed yellow flower cluster where the point typically flops over a bit to one side, giving it a cute little "elf cap" top. **Stiff goldenrod** has flat-topped clusters of small yellow flowers and wide oval leaves). The principal grass along the trail here is head-high **big bluestem**. It is recognizable by its often brightly colored stems (blue, pink, orange, green and many other colors) and by its distinctive seed heads which give the plant its other common name, "turkey foot."

2. This open oak woods was recently cleared of invasive buckthorn. An early invader of recently cleared understories is **burnweed**, a large plant with inconspicuous green flowers but conspicuous cottony white puffs of seeds. In these woods also look for the graceful, branching **elm-leaved goldenrod**.

3. Back in the grassland, watch for another flat-topped goldenrod, this one with very narrow leaves, **grass-leaved goldenrod**. And one of the most common and delicate species from mid-September on is **heath aster**. This species had long, thin leaves on the lower stalks all summer long, but by the time it opens its masses of small white daisy flowers with yellow centers, those larger leaves have all dropped off and been replaced by tiny heath-like leaves -- short, narrow, and thick.

4. Many of the creamy white and tubular flowers of **cream gentian** (that were featured in the late summer guide) in this area have been eaten by the deer. This problem was so severe in the mid nineties that we were able to find no uneaten plants in the entire preserve for some years. But now the heavy browsing is localized, thanks to ongoing deer control efforts by both the Forest Preserve District and the Village of Northbrook. Further down this trail and in many other places you'll see great numbers of this rare plant – our only gentian that isn't blue, and that typically blooms before September.

5. At the seasonal wetland indicated by the log bridge, notice two tall yellow flowers. One is on a waist high plant with winged stems; the ray flowers ("petals") have scalloped ends. This is **sneezeweed**, so called not because it causes hay fever (which it doesn't) but because it was once prepared as a medicine that was dried, powdered, and blown up people's noses, which indeed did make them sneeze. The other is the poorly named **saw-toothed sunflower** with its slightly toothed leaves on over-your-head stems, which are smooth and often covered with a fine powdery blue. On the other hand, if you notice a beautiful smell here, it may mean that someone has stepped on a bit of the foliage of **wild mint** that also grows in this swale. Its white flower clusters top calf-high stems, which as with all mints are square. The large and pointed heads of **tall goldenrod** are an indication that this brushy area is still in poor ecological shape; this goldenrod is the weedy (degradation dependent) species that is common along roadsides. Growing with it is the equally weedy **late boneset** with paired leaf and chest-high, flat-topped white flower clusters. Just before the log bridge, check for the rare and

conservative **Riddell's goldenrod**, with its flat-topped yellow flower clusters and gracefully arching leaves that clasp its waist-high stems.

6. On the south-facing slope of the little knob, you'll be surrounded with a fine mix of grasses described in earlier guides, **little bluestem, Indian grass and prairie dropseed**. In this mix watch for **smooth blue aster** (daisy-like blue flowers on smooth stems) and a plant or two (if the deer haven't eaten them yet) **prairie gentian**. It is an unmistakable "deep and hurtful blue." This rare and slow-growing plant was once the most common gentian of the upland prairie. With good management it should become the commonest gentian here in time, but that will take decades. This gentian opens only in bright sun. Near it (within four or five feet in two directions, fine two **ladies tresses** orchids. The tiny white orchid flowers are crowded in spirals on ankle high stalks.

7. Once you've descended from the heights of the little hill, notice two more gentian species. **Stiff gentian** has clusters of small bluish white flowers that open when it's sunny. But the flowers of **bottle gentian** never open. They wait for a burly bumble bee to force them open (and then vanish inside for a while to do the pollination ritual. Bottle gentians range from deep blue to bluish white, at least at this site. Also notice **hairy aster** with small white flowers and densely hairy stems.

8. In the opening in the little grove of white oaks you may be able to find another unusual plant, a species of **blazing star** that is too rare to mention in a trail guide, especially one that is posted on the Internet. But perhaps you can identify it from the latest edition of Swink and Wilhelm's "Plants of the Chicago Region" (which is the only Illinois plant book to cover it). So, a little challenge for the highly motivated.

9. After another passage through tall grasses, a sparser slope provides a good opportunity to learn the difference between two of the classic blue prairie asters. **Sky blue aster** has leaves on slender stalks. The

leaves are rough to the touch. **Smooth blue aster** has leaves that clasp the stem and are smooth indeed.

10. As you cross the log bridge back across the Central Swale, watch for three wetland species: **Slender gerardia** has pink flowers on long stalks. **New England aster** has deep purple (or sometimes pink) flowers on robust stalks with clasping leaves. And on the right as the trail starts up the slope is a fern-leaved plant with spikes of creamy snapdragon flowers, **marsh betony**.

11. Near the brush, weedy corner of the connector to the Outer Loop trail, look for a weedy aster, **Drummond's aster** – a plant that is likely to fade out here in time as rarer and more conservative plants take over in response to controlled burns. Drummond's aster will likely move around and find temporary spots by tree falls and animal diggings. This plant has blue flowers and arrow-head shaped leaves on clasping stems.

12. Near the connector to the Vestal Grove Trail, notice these plants that were covered in previous trailside guides: **tall coreopsis, bush clover, yellow gerardia, and brown-eyed Susan**.

13. In the woodland opening just west of the old oaks of Vestal Grove, look for these species: **tall thistle** – a soft plant, unlike the spiny alien thistles. Like the closely related savanna and prairie species called field thistle or pasture thistle, the undersides of the leaves are white. But pasture thistle has deeply cut leaves and pale lavender flowers (deeper purple in tall thistle). Tall thistle typically grows in or near woods. **Side-flowering aster** has small white flowers on a widely branching plant. **Tall boneset**, another weedy plant, has opposite leaves and flat-topped, dull-white flower clusters. **Woodland sunflower** has paired leaves held stiffly horizontal and yellow flowers with yellow middles.

14. Once you've entered the woods you'll be surrounded with hundreds of graceful knee-high goldenrods with pointed flower clusters that reach off to all sides on spreading stems – **elm-leaved**

goldenrod. Among them here and there watch for the pale blue **big-leaf aster**. The big leaves are the ground hugging leaves of the non-flowering plants which in some places cover the ground as a carpet.

15. Just before the next little open swale, stop between two bur oaks that are close to the trail and look for a goldenrod with smaller flower clusters rising out of the axils of the very wide, pointed-at-both-ends leaves. This is **zigzag goldenrod** – named for its zigzagging stem. It loves wet open woods. Further along, in the swale itself, along with lots of the woodland subspecies of **obedient plant** (tubular pink flowers), there are a few plants with the tubular snapdragon-like blooms of **turtle head**. Note the paired leaves (like the obedient plant) and the round stem (unlike the square mint stem of the obedient plant).

16. As you again enter the shade of the old oaks, watch for **Short's aster** (blue flowers on waist or chest-high stalks of neat, narrow-stemmed leaves) and **hog peanut** (a sprawling vine with three-part leaves and clusters of tubular bluish pea flowers).

Now you've nearly completed the loop. Take the quickest way back on a trail through brush by turning right at some obscure orange flags, or continue on straight through a savanna meadow and turn right on the trail you came in on near the crest of a small rise.

Thank you for enjoying the flora of Somme Prairie Grove. We're sorry that you have to cross a busy street to get back to your car, but we're glad (aren't you?) that this area is protected by that inconvenience from overuse. We'd be so pleased to hear any comments on this trailside wildflower guide or on the preserve generally.

Good field guides:

Wildflowers – Northeastern/North-central North America by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny. Excellent drawings and descriptions. Organized by color.

Newcomb's Wildflower Guide by Lawrence Newcomb. A key guides you quickly to the right group of plants.

Tallgrass Prairie Wildflowers by Douglas Ladd. Excellent photographs of the prairie species and many of the savanna species. Excellent summary of prairie ecology.

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