

Trail Guide
**An Introduction to
Somme Prairie Grove**

**A brief guide to the history, geology, restoration, ecology,
and just a few of the plants and animals
along the Inner Loop Trail of Somme Prairie Grove.**

Note: to learn more about wildflowers, ecology, and restoration – see the separate trail guides on those subjects.

Find the numbered points by following the trail from the Somme Woods parking lot and watching for features shown on the map.

1. This may look to the uninitiated like a natural woodland, but it is in ecological trouble. Don't get depressed by this dismal start to the hike. Instead, take a good look for comparison to (and inspiration from) the healthier woods you'll see at points 4 and beyond. The wildflowers and grasses of the forest floor that once were here have been shaded to death. And there are no young trees of the species that are natural to this site – oaks, hickories, wild plums or hazelnuts. On this tour you'll learn why.

Notice here: some larger **Bur oaks** – thick and deeply furrowed bark and deeply lobed large leaves; **Shagbark hickory** – distinctive bark hangs off the tree in curls; **Buckthorn** – dark bark and small, dark-green leaves (to be sure, check for the distinctive little thorns that form in the “V” between small forking branches).

2. This area is in even worse shape. Notice how dense the young buckthorn is. This former farm field was planted in part with trees not native to this area like silver poplar (big trees with pale bark) and honey locust (long, forked spines on the trunk).

3. Now we emerge into a recovering oak savanna. Some large invasive trees have been removed. The small trees are still mostly

the troublesome buckthorn. But there are young oaks, wildflowers and grasses. This too was once a farmer's field, but thanks to help from Niles North High School students and others, it's on the road to recovery as a natural savanna – a flowery grassland with scattered trees – much as it would have been 500 or 5,000 years ago.

4. The oak grove too is recovering. While the farm fields on both sides grew corn to feed the livestock in winter, this grove was “wooded pasture” – growing grass to feed the cows and horses in summer. But that was eighty years ago, before the Forest Preserve District bought this land. Sixty years later, the understory was solid buckthorn and little else. Now restoration has cut (and burned) the buckthorn and seeded back the grasses and flowers that make for a healthy understory.

Frequent birds (more likely heard than seen) are the red-eyed vireo (husky phrases go alternately up and down, as if it's asking questions and answering them) and the wood pewee (with its falling and then rising, thin, whistled “pee-uh-weee”).

5. This big opening looks much like a little prairie, but that's because the trees were all cut when this was a corn field. Now young oaks are starting to grow here and there, and in time it will look more like the savanna that you'll see at point 10.

We stand here at the crest of the Deerfield Lobe of the Lake Border Moraine. This trail will take you down the slope of this ridge of gravel left by the Wisconsin Glacier 12,000 years ago.

6. Mostly to the left is an area of low shrubs – dogwoods, viburnums, and wild plums. Thickets of shrubs are a natural part of prairies and savannas. Shrublands have many distinctive birds; here you're likely to hear the catbird (it meows like a cat), yellow-throat (“witchity, witchity, witchity”), and the indigo bunting (a vigorous song, with many notes typically repeated).

7. Most of the diverse and colorful wildflowers and grasses in this large open area are typical prairie species, and most of them came from threatened local remnants, their rescue described in the

book Miracle Under the Oaks: the revival of nature in America by New York Times science writer William K. Stevens. If you were standing in this spot 500 or 5,000 years ago, looking down slope you'd see the thinning out of the savanna trees, and then prairie stretching all the way from here to the Des Plaines river.

8. The brush on the right side of the trail at this point is mostly buckthorn, which volunteer crews have been gradually removing from the site during the cool months. Notice some trees in wire cages. These protect the young bur oaks, hazelnut, sumac and other tasty species from the deer until they're high enough to escape those hungry mouths. Both the Forest Preserve District and the Village of Northbrook cull some deer to keep numbers down, but there is still over-population; hence the need for the cages to protect the young trees.

9. The "corduroy" log bridges here are needed during wet weather when water flows down this swale toward the North Branch of the Chicago River. Note that the swale is completely vegetated. There's little erosion from a grassland like a prairie or oak savanna.

10. The rise here is called "Coyote Knob" – as this is the most frequent place people see the coyote surveying her or his domain. Most of the grasses on the hill are shorter species like little bluestem, dropseed and porcupine grasses. Here we are surrounded by scarlet oaks, giving this area a typical savanna structure. But the classic savanna tree is the bur oak. There are few bur oaks here because this area was all cleared for corn and wheat by settlers. The scarlet oak is the quickest to return to abandoned farm fields, since the acorns are small enough to be carried by blue jays. The bur oak acorn is distributed by squirrels, and it doesn't move as far. We have planted bur oak acorns from on-site trees to speed the process.

11. Have you noticed what's under your feet? The trails here are lined with path rush – a native plant that only grows in trails. Where it's not trampled, it can't compete. It makes for a good walking surface and protects against erosion.

12. We call the one big old bur oak here "the Deerslayer Oak" because when we started restoration it still had an active "deer stand" – a platform for a hunter (or poacher) to sit in and wait for deer. The sawed-off branches in the tree probably cleared lines of sight for the hunter. In the shade of this tree live woodland sunflower, two species of wild rye grasses and other open woodland plant species.

13. The open woods on the right are typical of the ancient oak woods, but unusual today. If you'd like to see them close up, take the Outer Loop Trail. The parallel ditches that the trail crosses are wheel ruts from "joy-riding" vehicles, in the days before the preserve was appreciated for its nature.

14. The trail turns back to the south in an open stand of white oaks with a rich understory of rare plants. This area was a solid stand of the weedy tall goldenrod before the restoration began. The white oaks here were planted by the Forest Preserve District before the concept of restoration was well developed. They may or may not stand up to the controlled burns that are needed to maintain the grassland understory. Bur oaks may replace them in time.

15. The white oaks to the west were, for a time, the only nesting site in this preserve for the blue-gray gnatcatcher – a small and highly active bug catcher with a buzzy call that has been written as "zpeeeee." This year the gnatcatchers nested in every grove. The tall grass here is mostly big bluestem. A few years back it was mostly Indiangrass. Preserve changes are discussed in the "restoration guides."

16. This area is part of the same fence line as the "Deerslayer Oak" area. But here little has been done, and the vegetation is overwhelmingly European buckthorn.

17. The large bunches of fine-leaved grass that are common on this slope are prairie dropseed. This grass is typical of the oldest and highest quality prairies. It is likely to increase over time in the better quality open areas throughout the site.

18. The dense waist-high grass in the swale (crossed by the log bridge) is bluejoint grass. This is the main water course on the site. Notice that there are no “banks” or defined “stream.” In the grassland there is often a gradual change from wet to dry, easy not to notice in spring until you’re up to your ankles in water. But where invasive trees and shrubs have killed off most of the grasses, erosion channels form. There is one visible from the Outer Loop trail where it crosses this same drainage.

19. House wren, eastern bluebird and indigo bunting often are found singing and feeding young in this area. They like the mix of grassland, shrubs and scattered trees.

20. From here you can look west to the foot of the moraine, with its wetlands, railroad tracks, and the ditch that carries what is left of the West Fork of the Chicago River. Closer to you look for lots of legumes (relatives of peas and bean) with names like prairie clover, bush clover, leadplant, false indigo and purple vetch (see wildflower trail guides).

21. Look west here to see an area under rapid restoration. Large amounts of brush have been cut back, revealing a few young bur and scarlet oaks that had been almost choked out by it. Some of the larger invasive trees have been killed by fire.

22. The grove of large old oaks to the south is named “Vestal Grove” in honor of Arthur Vestal (Illinois botanist who first recommended the conservation of our fire-dependent oak communities) and referencing the sacred ancient oak groves of Europe. The history of the experimental restoration of this grove is dramatically presented in “Miracle Under the Oaks: the rebirth of nature in America” by New York Times writer William K. Stevens.

23. The shrubs protected by metal and mesh cages are American hazelnut – thought once to be the commonest shrub of the Midwestern savannas and woodlands. But it is so tasty to deer that it

has been largely eliminated from areas as overpopulated by deer as most forest preserves.

24. The trail passes through a bit of the interior of Vestal Grove. Fire has cleared sufficient brush for recovery of many woodland grasses and flowers, but it’s still too dark for oak reproduction, except on the fringes. Oaks are that dependent on sufficient light. In the largest trees the red-tailed hawk sometimes builds a nest, which is typically used by the great horned owl in the subsequent year.

25. On the left is Cottonwood Pond, one of four ponds in the preserve deep enough in spring to attract breeding frogs (western chorus frog, spring peeper and leopard frog), American toads and blue-spotted salamanders. Lightning blasted the largest cottonwood some years back, but the tree’s doing fine.

26. You’re now back at the summit of the moraine. Enjoy the richness of nature for a few more minutes, and brace yourself for the grim buckthorn patches as you get close to the intersection. Thanks for introducing yourself to the woodlands, savannas and wetlands of Somme Prairie Grove.

References:

- Miracle Under the Oaks: The Revival of Nature in America*, William K. Stevens, Pocket Books, 1995.
- Atlas of Biodiversity (see <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/pubprod/index.cfm>)
- Chicago Wilderness Forest Policy (see <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/biodiversity/policy/index.cfm>)
- Chicago Wilderness Fire Policy (see <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/biodiversity/policy/index.cfm>)
- CW Report Card (see <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/pubprod/index.cfm>)]

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