

Grand Prairie Bird Alliance



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A Chapter of National Audubon

An Illinois Audubon Affiliate

The mission of Grand Prairie Bird Alliance is to engage and promote activities that foster an understanding and appreciation of our natural world and that encourages others to join in this cause.

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PROGRAMS Given Harper, Program Director

The Grand Prairie Bird Alliance and the Illinois Wesleyan University Environmental Studies and Biology programs will sponsor two public presentations in the spring semester, 2024. The presentations will be held in room C101 at the Center for Natural Science (CNS), 201 Beecher Street, Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU), Bloomington. **Parking is available in the lot just north of the CNS on Beecher Street.**

On February 22, 7:00 p.m. Trevor Edmonson will talk about “Fantastic Moths and How to Find Them.”

Trevor is the land manager at The Nature Conservancy’s Kankakee Sands preserve in northwest Indiana, which consists of 8,600 acres of restored prairie, savannah, and wetlands. He will discuss the diverse world of moths (in Illinois alone, there several thousand species), and how they serve as important pollinators and as a food source for many bird species. Trevor will give an overview of the identification of moth families and describe how you can start looking for them in your own backyard. He will also share a bit about his work at Kankakee Sands, where over 1300 moth species have been documented.



On March 28, 7:00 p.m. Dr. Paul Switzer, a Professor of Biology at Eastern Illinois University, will talk on “The Urban Butterfly Initiative.”

Getting people to notice, understand, and value nature is a key challenge in today’s ever more urban and technological world. In his presentation, Dr. Switzer will explain the genesis of the Urban Butterfly Initiative (UBI), a community service nonprofit he founded in 2018 that uses butterflies as the hook for broader conservation, environmental education, and community building goals across cities and towns in central Illinois. UBI is collaborating with the Town of Normal to establish butterfly habitat at the Hidden Creek Nature Sanctuary.



What is the Grand Prairie? *Guest Columnist, Lenore Sobota*

“Grand Prairie” is more than just part of the name for our bird alliance. It is one of 14 “Natural Divisions” in the state of Illinois – and it is the largest one. It gives the organization a sense of place.

“These geographic regions have similar topography, soils, bedrock, plants and animals,” according to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The classification of these areas assists the state in planning and providing necessary resources for preservation and restoration, according to the DNR.

The topography of the Grand Prairie is flat to rolling with low ridges left behind by glaciers, which also contributed to the composition of the soil.

Stretching north to Ogle County, south to Shelby County, west to Henry County and east to the Indiana border, the Grand Prairie Division includes a large portion of Central and East-Central Illinois. Once covered mostly by tallgrass prairie, only a small percentage remains of what gave the Prairie State its name. Of an estimated 21 million acres of prairie that originally covered Illinois, only 0.01% remains.

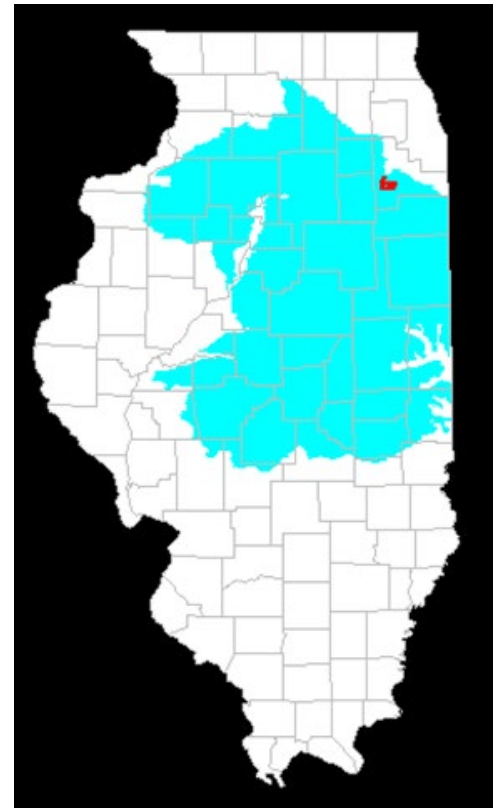
But it’s not just prairie vegetation that has been lost. The Grand Prairie once was home to bison, Blanding’s turtles and Franklin’s ground squirrels. Now those animals have been extirpated from the region or are in danger – as are the native prairies themselves.

Parts of the division have high clay content in the soil, resulting in marshes and potholes. However, drainage efforts for agriculture have diminished those habitats, too. Other features of the Grand Prairie include trees along rivers and streams and in scattered groves, savannas and upland forests.

The Illinois Natural History Survey notes that early pioneers and travelers through the area described the area as “a sea of grass” and “a vast ocean of meadow-land.”

Continued on page 3

Lenore Sobota has been a lifelong birder. She has served on the GPBA Board of Directors, contributes to annual bird counts, is a Master Naturalist, volunteers on habitat restoration projects, and leads bird walks. A hiker, kayaker, biker, cross-country skier, and rock/ice climber, there isn’t much she doesn’t do! A retired reporter from the Pantagraph, she continued to write and produce countless outdoor articles under the column Explore With Lenore.



Grand Prairie Region



Lenore in the native prairie remnant of ParkLands’ Weston Cemetery. Photo by Anne Meyer

Grand Prairie *continued from page 2*

Although we will never see the vast “sea of grass” that greeted early settlers, efforts by government agencies, private organizations and even individuals seek to preserve what remains as well as restore and recreate what we have lost.

These are not just aesthetic or nostalgic efforts. They are important to such things as improving water quality, limiting erosion, controlling flooding and protecting crucial habitat for birds, butterflies, other pollinators and other animals.

For example, wet prairies, which have surface water in winter and early spring, are used by migrating waterfowl and wading birds. Birds such as bobolinks and grasshopper sparrows need mesic prairies, which have good moisture and good drainage.

The ParkLands Foundation Ridgetop Hill Prairie and a section of its Merwin Preserve are rare hill prairies, which have been designated as Illinois Nature Preserves. They are used by migrating raptors, and the area around Ridgetop has been noted as a nesting area for lark sparrows.

The Weston Cemetery Prairie, another property managed by ParkLands, also has been designated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. It is an original remnant prairie that never underwent plowing. Among the birds you’ll find there are dickcissels.

Other places where you can find remnant and restored prairies are Goose Lake Prairie State Park, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and Allerton Park.



Echinacea purpurea with Insect
Photo by Patricia Carlson, GPBA
Newsletter Editor and Board Secretary



Male Cardinal in Winter
Photo by GPBA Member Ray Silva

Birdhouses Gifted to the Hoose Nature Playground

Bill Davison, Field Trip Director and Bode Thompson, Youth Director

On the second-to-last day before winter break, a small group of Colene Hoose students helped members of the Grand Prairie Bird Alliance install more than 25 birdhouses throughout their newly completed nature playground. The birdhouses were the brainchild of Bird Alliance board member Bode Thompson, who saw the potential to transform the grounds of his elementary school alma mater into a haven for birds. Bode and his grandfather made the birdhouses, which include designs aimed at chickadees, wrens, bluebirds, and a screech owl.

These birdhouses, located amongst the incredible number of native trees and shrubs planted throughout the school property, are sure to become the home of many broods in breeding seasons to come.

In addition, the owner of Wild Birds Unlimited supported the project with a sturdy bird feeding station, which was installed in the school's reading garden on the west side of the building. The school's groundskeeper is making sure to keep the bird feeder filled. We understand she has also cultivated quite the friendship with local crows by feeding them peanuts on the regular. There is also a red-tailed hawk who has taken up residence. We look forward to the bird adventures sure to come at Hoose!

For more information see:

<https://www.grandprairiebirdalliance.org/news>



GPBA Youth Director Bode Thompson



Photo by Pantagraph Staff

GRAND PRAIRIE BIRD ALLIANCE

FIELD TRIP REPORT

Photos, graphic and ebird list by
Rachel Emmett, GPBA Member

GPBA had two well-attended winter field trips. Matt Fraker led the January 7th walk at Fraker Farm. Pirmin Nietlisbach led the January 27th walk at ParkLands Merwin Nature Preserve as reported here by member Rachel Emmett.



A stunning Red-Headed Woodpecker poses for photographer Rachel Emmett at Merwin on 1/27/24



Bird Walk Leader and ISU Biology Professor Pirmin Nietlisbach identifies birds as reported in ebird by Rachel Emmett. See list at right.

16 Species observed

- 5 Canada Goose
- 1 Bald Eagle
- 1 Great Horned Owl
- 1 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
- 10 Red-headed Woodpecker
- 2 Red-bellied Woodpecker
- 1 Hairy Woodpecker
- 3 Northern Flicker
- 10 Blue Jay
- 8 Black-capped Chickadee
- 5 Tufted Titmouse
- 6 White-breasted Nuthatch
- 20 European Starling
- 2 American Robin
- 3 White-throated Sparrow
- 5 Northern Cardinal

Please send us your email to

grandprairiebirdalliance@gmail.com

to continue receiving our newly expanded newsletter. We are moving to electronic mail for better sustainability practices. We don't want to lose you!

CONSERVATION

Angelo Capparella,
Conservation Director

Tree Health Herbicide Drift Threatens Habitat Quality

Have you noticed trees dying in your neighborhood? Tree canopies in our area are getting thinner yearly as our trees accumulate stress and slowly lose vigor. Our trees are under stress from various factors, including extreme weather associated with climate change and herbicide exposure due to dicamba volatilizing into the air.

We need trees. It is hard to imagine our cities and landscape without them, but our flagrant disregard for the environment pushes us in that direction. To learn more, read this [informative article](#) from the Prairie



Sycamore by Patricia Carlson, GPBA
Newsletter Editor and Board Secretary

CBC Count Summary 2023:

Prior to the turn of the 20th century, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas “Side Hunt” to see who could bring in the most birds. But starting on Christmas Day 1900, the National Audubon Society started a new holiday tradition—a “Christmas Bird Census”, now called a Christmas Bird Count (CBC), that counts the number of species and individuals within a 15-mile-diameter count circle. Now each of the 3,000+ counts chooses a single date between December 14 and January 5 to perform their census. Data is used to monitor bird populations, range changes, and other analyses. For more information:

<https://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count/history-christmas-bird-count>

The Bloomington-Normal Christmas Bird Count (CBC) circle first began its annual census in 1967 and is organized by the Grand Prairie Bird Alliance, a National Audubon chapter. The Bloomington-Normal CBC’s 15-mile diameter count circle is centered on a point just west of Towanda and includes our two reservoirs, Normal, and much of Bloomington. The date we choose is always the first Saturday within the December 14-January 5 choice window. This year it was on December 16, during which 22 volunteers organized into 9 field parties and 2 feeder watchers. We recorded 60 species (same number as last year) and 6,147 individuals. Our 2010-2022 average is 68, and range is 58-78. So despite the light rain we did okay.

Significant finds were the following:

- Great Blue Heron 12 (new high)
- Northern Flicker 49 (new high)
- Pileated Woodpecker 1 (second time on our CBC)
- Hermit Thrush 5 (new high)
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow 1 (second time on our CBC)

WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES

by Mary Oliver

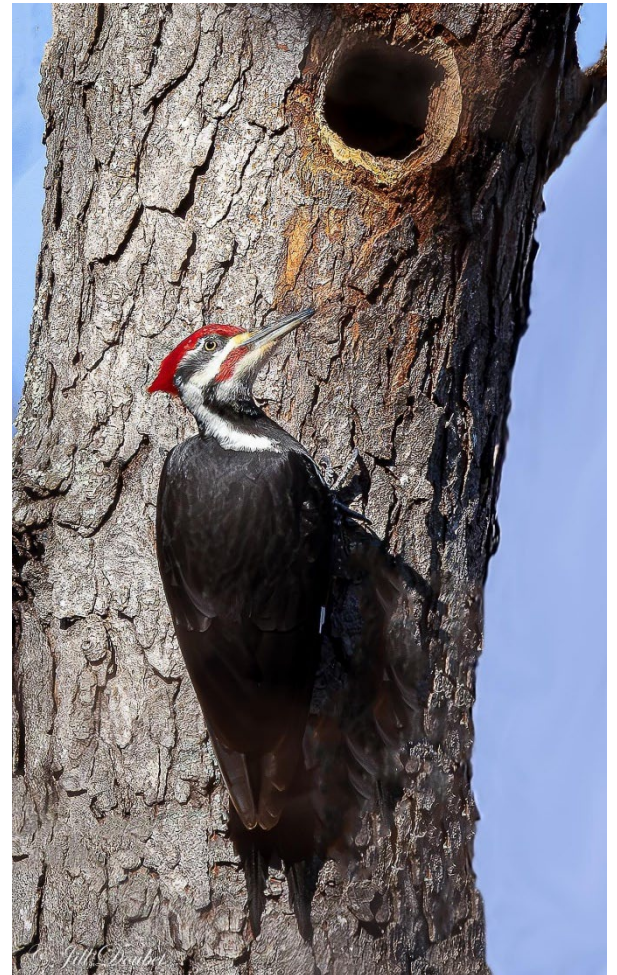
When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

PLANTS & BIRDHOUSES

GPBA coordinates with our local Parks and Recreation Departments to provide seed, native shrubs, trees, and birdhouses throughout our parks. We provide funding and volunteer hours to support these efforts. An Eastern Screech Owl has moved into one of our recently upgraded boxes, and we look forward to observing this owl family in the months ahead. Join us on our spring bird walks to learn more about GPBA's habitat restoration efforts.

VOLUNTEERS

Long time GPBA member, **Jack Muirhead**, spearheaded the removal of invasive honeysuckle in the **Audubon Important Bird Area (IBA)** of Ewing Park, Hedgeapple Woods. GPBA thanks Jack for his countless hours in this monumental effort. We will continue to provide funding to restore this area with native plantings.



Pileated Woodpecker in ParkLands Merwin Preserve on 2/3/2024.
Photo by GPBA Member Jill Allen Doubet

HOLD THE DATE: Sunday afternoon, May 19, we return to Illinois Art Station for our Annual Meeting. Details in the next newsletter.

GRAND PRAIRIE BIRD ALLIANCE
P.O. BOX 142
NORMAL, IL 61761

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Christina Schulz

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Youth Director

Bode Thompson

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Francesca Lewis
Tania Barreto

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

SAVE the DATE

- February 22 Thursday** **PROGRAM: 7:00 p.m.** Trevor Edmonson will talk about “Fantastic Moths and How to Find Them.” IWU, CNS, Rm C101. See page 1 for details
- March 28 Thursday** **PROGRAM: 7:00 p.m.** Dr. Paul Switzer, a Professor of Biology at Eastern Illinois University, will talk on “The Urban Butterfly Initiative. See page 1 for details
- May 19 Sunday** **ANNUAL MEETING, 1:00 p.m.** Illinois Art Station, Normal Details in the next newsletter

We hope you enjoy our newly expanded newsletter. If you are receiving this by mail, you can help us save resources by signing up to receive color editions by email. Sign up at: grandprairiebirdalliance@gmail.com

Grand Prairie Bird Alliance board meetings are held from August to May, except for December. There are many volunteer opportunities. Members are always welcome and encouraged to join in a variety of committees, whatever amount of time you can give. To find out how to become more involved in your chapter contact any of the officers listed at the left of this page at grandprairiebirdalliance@gmail.com