

Where Bog, Fen and Tallgrass Prairie Unexpectedly Thrive

Hiding within what can seem like Chicagoland's endless suburbs are slices of nature that make for a perfect weekend camping trip, with restaurants in easy reach.



Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is the largest parcel of prairie near Chicago and it can be visited on a weekend trip to find nature near the city. Credit...Anjali Pinto for The New York Times

By Peter Kujawinski June 29, 2022 New York Times

One common knock against the Chicago area is that “real” nature seems far away. Apart from Lake Michigan — arguably the region’s best natural attribute — it’s sprawling suburbs and monotone fields of corn in every direction. I have subscribed to this idea for years.

But it’s not actually true. If you’re looking for nature within a short drive of the city, as I recently discovered, it’s possible to piece together a nature-focused itinerary through the suburbs north to south, traveling from the border with Wisconsin to the border with Indiana. It is certainly not backcountry, but I was surprised at how much of the natural world we found. There was also a big advantage: bountiful restaurant options. It made for a weekend that scratched the nature itch without the labor of camp cooking.

Forty-five miles northwest of the city, our first stop, [Volo Bog State Natural Area](#) features “the only open-water quaking bog in Illinois,” according to its website. Briefly, this means that it is a body of acidic water mostly covered by a floating mat of vegetation. In some places, the mat is so thick it can support trees like tamarack, a type of larch. In the middle of this floating forest is a small pond of open water, the last remnant of what was a much larger lake before the bog took over. It’s called a quaking bog because that’s what happens to the vegetation when you step on it.

We were able to walk through this unique ecosystem thanks to the Volo Bog Interpretive Trail, a floating boardwalk that wound through the park. I enjoyed the open water center the most. It transported me to a different place. For a few minutes at least, bog birch, sphagnum moss, highbush blueberry and water lilies replaced traffic, electrical lines, agricultural fields and subdivisions. It was like a little outpost of Canada’s boreal forests in the Chicago suburbs. The trails were even long enough that my children started complaining about all the nature they had to walk through.

After brushing off ticks, we drove a few minutes to [Fratello’s Hot Dogs](#) in the town of Volo, where we feasted on Chicago-style hot dogs, cheeseburgers and fries that were perfect examples of the genre. And my strawberry milkshake — with pieces of cut up strawberry so big they clogged my straw — was the perfect accompaniment to our family’s relaxed drive to another wetland, this time a fen, which is a close relation to a bog.

Clocking in at 43.1 acres, [Ferson Creek Fen Nature Preserve](#) was a sliver of bird-filled wilderness tucked along the Fox River. Perhaps because of its diminutive size and the fact that it was truly a preserve (no playgrounds, barbecue grills, water fountains or bathrooms), it was nearly empty. It turned out to be the place where I finally understood the difference between a bog and a fen — a bog is essentially self-contained, but a fen is a wetland into which water flows on at least a semiregular basis.

Out of all the places we visited on our weekend trip, Ferson Creek Fen was a great example of the kind of discovery you make while on a road trip. It was just a pretty slice of wild along the river, with tall cottonwood trees standing protectively over the wetland, hidden in the plain sight of Chicago’s suburbs

By the end of our stop in Ferson Creek, we were hiked-out and ready to relax at a campsite. A few days before, I had reserved a spot at [Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve](#) near Crete, which is part of south suburban [Will County's Forest Preserves](#). Just a stone's throw from the border with Indiana, Goodenow was about 20 miles from the city limits. I had never camped this close to the city. I figured we'd check it out and if it wasn't the nature experience we were hoping for, we'd just go to a motel.

As it turned out, our campsite at Goodenow was one of the best I've been to in years, even in comparison with campsites many hours farther away. It was well-maintained, well-treed and not crowded at all, even on Memorial Day weekend — the perfect place for pickup soccer with my children and for lounging in a hammock beneath a canopy of oak trees.

We skipped campfire cooking for dinner at [Smokey Jo's](#), a hopping restaurant/bar in Crete where every TV was tuned to the Chicago White Sox game. If I squinted while eating my Bada Bing Italian Sausage sandwich, it felt like I could make out the skyscrapers of downtown Chicago in the distance.



The next morning, we were back in Crete for breakfast at [Wood's Corner](#). Pancakes were the standout. There were tough negotiations with my daughters as I tried to convince them to give me additional portions of Dee's Delight — a mash-up of pancakes, chocolate chips and chocolate syrup — and best of all, cinnamon rolls pancakes, which really did taste like cinnamon rolls in flapjack form.

It's a good thing we ate so much breakfast at Wood's Corner, because we needed it at [Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie](#), a massive prairie preserve managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Only 45 miles from the city, it is the largest parcel of prairie in the area, and one that exemplifies the Chicago region's attempts to recover some of the wilderness it has lost. Formerly a munitions manufacturing area, Midewin is slowly being restored to what it was before it became part of Chicagoland, a metropolitan area of 10 million people.



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There are still signs of Midewin's former life manufacturing TNT, such as roads and bunkers, but they are steadily being taken over by nature. This transition gives the land an abandoned feel. At the same time, you can see the vibrancy of the restoration in the thick fields of prairie, the roaming bison and the bright coloring of the orchard oriole and the blue grosbeak, two birds I've never seen in my city backyard.

On the day of our visit, a heat wave rolled through and our pleasant, 70-degree excursions at Volo Bog and Ferson Creek Fen the day before were replaced by 90-degree hikes through tallgrass prairie that was nowhere near tall enough to shade us from the sun. It didn't help that we ran out of water. But despite being hot, thirsty and footsore, it was clear that Midewin was worthy of a return trip.

Our final stop was a classic of the road trip experience: the local ice cream parlor. Located in farming country near Midewin, [Minooka Creamery](#) was the perfect stop after two days of hiking.

As we ate ice cream on a picnic bench under a shade tree, home felt very far away. I felt contentedly exhausted. I wasn't sure what we'd do next and couldn't quite remember what we had been doing only hours before. In other words, it was a classic disconnect from daily life — the kind of vacation experience that usually happens after days of travel. As it turned out, “real” nature wasn't far away at all. Once our ice cream was finished, we piled into our road-trip dirtied minivan and arrived home within the hour.

Comment:

Absent from the suggestions are any sites in Indiana, including a national park (Indiana Dunes National Park). There also other prairie remnants in Indiana like Hoosier Prairie and Kankakee Sands (with bison!). And just across the state line from Goodenow is the German Methodist Cemetery Prairie in Lowell, IN.