There are very few written accounts of the Grand Prairie from which Illinois gets its nickname, "The Prairie State," and even fewer in art. An elusive landscape to most 19th century artists, prairies lacked the traditional composition elements artists relied on at the time, such as trees to frame the foreground or mountains in the background. The artists moved on to capture the Rockies, Yosemite, and the great American West.

In 1820, Illinois had 22 million acres of prairie, roughly two thirds of the state. By 1900, most of Illinois' prairies were gone.

The movement of four glaciers gave rise to the prairie ecosystems of Illinois. When early settlers discovered the prairie's rich soil, they quickly converted a majority of the state to farmland. Through the bounty of nature, Chicago became a great metropolis. By 1978, fewer than 2,300 acres—roughly three and a half square miles—of original prairie remained in the entire state.

Of those undisturbed prairie sites, known as remnant prairie, most are along railroad rights-of-way, in pioneer-era cemeteries, and in places that were not suitable for farming.

But in prairie conservation, resilient landscapes have been protected and created through the care and advocacy of people. That story of resilience sparked the interest of Philip Juras, an artist trained in landscape architecture with a passion for botany and history. His new exhibition, Picturing the Prairie, on view at the Chicago Botanic Garden through September 12, explores a landscape many assume extinct or elusive: the prairie. Traveling from his home in Athens, Georgia, Juras spent five years on the project, guided by some of the foremost prairie conservationists in Illinois and his own research. Through his masterful artistry, he illuminates one of the great evolutions of the last generation in conservation—a reawakened understanding of humans' symbiotic relationship with nature—and a call to action to continue protecting it.

Protecting What Remains: Goose Lake Prairie Nature Preserve

It is a moving experience to set foot in a true prairie remnant, ponder the profusion of flowers and grasses, and imagine how the patch of prairie in front of you could have once extended across millions of acres of Illinois and beyond. The rich virgin prairies that were the foundation of Illinois’ extraordinary agricultural wealth are now functionally extinct as an ecosystem, existing today only in tiny unplowed fragments. Without the protection and management of motivated individuals and nonprofit and governmental organizations, even those fragments would be gone.

— Philip Juras, Picturing the Prairie: A Vision of Restoration

Goose Lake Prairie is the largest remnant tallgrass prairie east of the Mississippi River. Like much of the original prairie in the state, Goose Lake Prairie was sculpted by glaciers. The area was part of a continuous grassland that stretched from Indiana to the Rockies, known in the 19th century as the Grand Prairie. Openlands protected Goose Lake Prairie's original 240 acres in 1969, when Executive Director Gunnar Petersen and members of the board raised funds and convinced the state of Illinois to acquire the property before it could be developed for industry. Since then, Openlands has worked collaboratively to conserve additional land, and the preserve, at 2,537 acres, now totals ten times its original size. The site contains a diverse array of plant and animal life and a major portion of it is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, a designation given to only the highest quality ecosystems, protecting them from development by the state in perpetuity.

The diversity at Goose Lake Prairie represents a little known fact about the Chicago Wilderness—a region made up of southeastern Wisconsin, northeastern Illinois, northwestern Indiana and the southwest tip of Michigan along the lake—that it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the United States. Even compared to species diversity in places like the Amazon Rainforest, grasslands and prairies win out. On average, nearly 100 species of plants inhabit a ten square foot of tallgrass prairie and a prairie can support hundreds of pollinators, insects, and other wildlife.

Juras’ painting and the prairies he depicts remind us that one must simply reawaken their way of seeing to fully appreciate this place—finding joy in the microcosm of the prairie: its sounds, sights, and smells.
In the age of climate change, prairies are an effective nature-based solution: prairies can store much more carbon below ground than a forest can store above ground.

The work of Openlands and many other organizations, like the Friends of the Illinois Nature Preserves, require time, engagement, and creativity to restore the prairie. Prairie resilience is built largely upon two pillars: preserving biological diversity and increasing the size and connectivity of the habitats that the biological diversity depends upon. Therefore, restoration and reconnection of fragmented landscapes is one of the best strategies to support prairie ecosystems. A newly planted prairie takes at least three to five years to establish, spending most of its energy on establishing the extensive root systems that create the nutrient-rich soil Illinois is known for.

Once the prairie becomes established, it still needs care. From removing invasive plants to planting native seed mixes and plant monitoring, a steward creates like the painter with paint. Humans and wildlife reap the benefits of this creative restoration as prairies mitigate flooding, clean the air and water, and capture carbon. Most of the prairie’s carbon sequestration happens below ground, where prairie roots can dig into the soil to depths up to 15 feet or more. In the age of climate change, prairies are a strong nature-based solution: prairies can store more carbon below ground than a forest can store above ground. One acre of pristine prairie can store about five tons of carbon. The same five tons take more than six acres of forest to store.

Throughout Picturing the Prairie, prairies are no doubt the main event, yet behind every picture Juras describes the intricate connection to its stewards — volunteers who give countless hours to the care and restoration of this re-emerging ecosystem.

Fire, Culture, and a Call to Action: Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

I want you, the viewer, to fall in love with these places the way that I have. And I hope that the painting helps facilitate that — by reaching the heart, the way to facilitate action.

When one participates in a prescribed prairie burn, one engages in a cultural and ecological act that goes back millennia — begun by the indigenous peoples who depended on the land for their livelihood — and sustained by Native Americans and a diverse group of stewards today.

As the largest protected landscape in northeastern Illinois, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, offers a glimpse at the essence that once was the Grand Prairie. It also represents the changing cultural landscape of our region, and a call to action for stewards, present and future.

The land tells the story of the native tribe from which Midewin gets its name — a Potawatomi Native American word referring to the tribe’s healers, who it was believed also kept the tribal society in balance. As first peoples of the land, they harvested sustainably for thousands of years before the Black Hawk War in 1832, when they were forcibly removed from Illinois. As settlers moved in, some of the land was tilled and farmed, and in the 1940s the military purchased the land for the Joint Army Ammunition Plant. In the 1990s, a cohort with Openlands as an essential leader, began the task of protecting this large landscape from development. With this advocacy, the US Congress established Midewin as the first national tallgrass prairie in 1996, and transferred the property to the management of the US Forest Service. Now, the land is remembering what it once was, with the help of prairie stewards that collect and plant seeds, control invasives and restore the natural processes that shaped this land — hydrology and fire.

Prairie fires play an important role in ecosystem health in several crucial ways. The fires allow the overgrowth of trees, ensuring enough sunlight for the prairie plants to thrive, and fire helps to speed up decomposition which returns nutrients to the soil. Because of their deep roots, prairie plants can survive the burns, unlike many shallow, invasive plants.

Prescribed burns have returned to the prairie due to the advocacy and action of stewards, organizations, and land managers that recognize their importance to the tallgrass prairie ecology. Midewin now burns, on average, 3,500 acres each year. And in Picturing the Prairie, Juras hopes to instill that love of and action for the prairie in its viewers — by visiting the prairies, volunteering to steward them, or planting native species in their own backyards.

A Call to Action to Conserve 30x30

Since its founding in 1963, Openlands has connected people to nature in service of meaningful change that starts with meeting the needs and respecting the values of the people who live throughout our region, state, and nation. Collectively, we must accelerate the pace and scale of conservation, with nature and agriculture as complementary pieces of how our region grows and develops. Openlands is working with members of Congress to transform this challenge into an opportunity. One way is through the RENEW Conservation Corps Act, reimagining the Civilian Conservation Corps program from a century ago. The proposal would support over a million good-paying jobs to restore and maintain open spaces across the country in both urban and rural areas.

For all of us to withstand adversity outlined in the UN Report, including those of our own making, we must immediately invest in conservation principles that are collaborative and inclusive, restore biodiversity, and create green jobs. To learn more about the 30x30 initiative and tell your elected representative to take action now, visit openlands.org/30x30.

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Welcome New Openlands Board Members

MARTINA KELLER
A lifelong resident of the Chicago area, Martina Keller worked 20 years as a distinguished immigration attorney with a national practice in the firm of Kempster, Keller and Lenz-Calvo, Ltd. An avid traveler and visual artist, Ms. Keller is inspired by nature and enjoys hiking, biking, skiing, and kayaking. “I am interested in all of the exciting conservation projects and programs that Openlands has to offer, particularly the programs to protect and plant trees. And of course, learning more about the role Openlands can play in reviving the Civilian Conservation Corps.”

KERL LAJEUNE
As the Deputy Director of Planning and Design at the Public Building Commission of Chicago, Kerl LaJeune oversees new and renovated municipal, commercial, and K-12 educational projects on behalf of the City of Chicago, Cook County and various sister agencies. “Openlands offers a unique opportunity to engage with a much larger audience and demographic, encompassing efforts with engagements in the regions outside of Cook county. While my current and past interests have been vast, the focus of many of my involvements have largely targeted the Chicago and Cook County area.”

RAED MANSOUR
Reed Mansour is the Director for the Office of Innovation at the Chicago Department of Public Health. He uses a health equity lens to be a catalyst for change, creating improvements in health using urban and data science, informatics, and application development. “Openlands has a unique collaborative strategy for our environment where they act to conserve with both work on the ground and advocating for better policies in protecting our natural resources for everyone’s benefit, and that resonates with me.”

SACHIN MASTER
Sachin Master is a Senior Vice President at Clerestory Consulting, who brings 15+ years of professional experience helping various organizations elevate their operational performance. He focuses on building collaborative working teams to solve complex challenges and brings deep program, project, and change management expertise to keep his teams’ energy focused on the right strategic priorities. “I’m keenly aware that the preservation and growth of open spaces in the Chicago region must happen through intentional efforts, and am excited for the opportunity to join an organization with Openlands’ track record of making successful impacts.”

Save the Date

OPENLANDS 2021 ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Thursday, October 14, 2021
Hilton Chicago

2021 Conservation Leadership Award Recipient: U.S. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois

The Honorable Fay Hartog-Levin and Commissioner Debra Shore, Co-Chairs
Anne Roosevelt, Honorary Chair

JOIN OPENLANDS for the 2021 Annual Luncheon honoring U.S. Senator Dick Durbin’s environmental legacy and the power that each of us has to make change through civic engagement. From ensuring clean water through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and protecting vital landscapes like Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge to championing current legislation supporting new green jobs for a healthier, more climate resilient future, the Senator’s passion for the environment has been instrumental in ensuring the protection of people and nature.

We hope to be together again in person...stay tuned!

OPENLANDS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING LEAD SUPPORT:

BALL HORTICULTURAL COMPANY

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COMED

GRAND VICTORIA FOUNDATION

GALLARD AND KENTON K HAMILTON FOUNDATION

GRAND VICTORIA FOUNDATION

HULL FAMILIY FOUNDATION

SOLBERG

WILLOW SPRINGS FOUNDATION

Below, friends enjoy a moment at Goose Lake Prairie, circa 1969: Hazel Olmsted (second from left), Openlands board member Dr. Charles Olmsted, and Openlands co-founder, Jeffrey R. Short, Jr.

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Experiencing the Prairie

THERE IS NO ONE WAY TO EXPERIENCE THE PRAIRIE
But if you’re new to taking in Illinois’ namesake landscape, here are a few things to keep in mind:

Prairies are best experienced at a leisurely pace, in order to look closely and see the full expanse of biodiversity they possess. The golden hours of dawn and dusk can be especially magical times. Each season offers a different experience, and so make sure you’re protected from the sun and well hydrated.

• Don’t Forget Water, Sunscreen, and a Hat:
  Wherever you decide to venture, please remember to recreate responsibly:
  • Leave No Trace: The flowers, while beautiful, are for all to enjoy and are healthiest in the ground. Take pictures, but don’t pick the flowers or plants. Carry out what you carry in to leave no trace.
  • Take a Field Guide:
  Field Guides can help you identify plants and slow down to take in the ground. Take pictures, but don’t pick the flowers or plants. Carry out what you carry in to leave no trace.
  • Leave No Trace:
  • Take the Trail: you never know what kind of rare plant your feet may be stepping on!
  • Look Closely, and Bring Binoculars: There is amazing wildlife at the prairie, especially grassland birds. Binoculars can help you see wildlife up close, even from far away.
  • Don’t Forget Water, Sunscreen, and a Hat: There are not a lot of trees on the prairie so make sure you’re protected from the sun and well hydrated.

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• Leave No Trace: The flowers, while beautiful, are for all to enjoy and are healthiest in the ground. Take pictures, but don’t pick the flowers or plants. Carry out what you carry in to leave no trace.
• Stay on the Trail: you never know what kind of rare plant your feet may be stepping on!
• Take a Field Guide: Field Guides can help you identify plants and slow down to take in the prairie at the same time. Apps like Seek or iNaturalist provide a mobile-friendly solution.
• Look Closely, and Bring Binoculars: There is amazing wildlife at the prairie, especially grassland birds. Binoculars can help you see wildlife up close, even from far away.
• Don’t Forget Water, Sunscreen, and a Hat: There are not a lot of trees on the prairie so make sure you’re protected from the sun and well hydrated.

Like so much in life, the prairie gets better with age. Remnant, or unplowed prairies are no different. These mostly small landscapes differ from many of the restored prairies because in the thousands of years they have existed, the prairie has formed a cohesive plant community that works in beautiful synchronicity. Younger, restored prairies are also a joy to visit and revisit as they establish.

None of the prairies exist without the care of dedicated volunteers and conservationsists, from prairie burns to seed cultivation. You can learn more about opportunities to volunteer at openlands.org/prairiesteward.

Almond Marsh Forest Preserve 1 (503 Acres)
32550 N Almond Rd, Grayslake, IL

Arthur J. Janura Forest Preserve 2 (4,366 Acres)
IL-55, Elgin, IL

Bartel Grassland Land and Water Reserve 3 (585 Acres)
Central Ave & Flossmoor Rd, Tinley Park, IL

Beach Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve 4 (2 Acres)
Davison Junction, IL

Beaubien Woods 5 (279 Acres)
W Doty Ave S, southeast of E 130th St and S Ellis Ave, Chicago IL

Belmont Prairie Nature Preserve 6 (25 Acres)
4721 Walnut Ave, Downers Grove, IL

Bobolink Meadow Land and Water Preserve 7 (918 Acres)
Tinley Park, IL

Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve 8 (315 Acres)
24322 L11-3, Braidwood, IL

Bunker Hill Savanna 9 (162 Acres)
Calwedd and Jean, Chicago IL

Cave Creek Glade Nature Preserve 10 (25 Acres)
US-45, Belknap, IL

Chain O Lakes State Park 11 (7,100 Acres)
Jamas Rd, Spring Grove, IL

Chicago Botanic Garden 12 (385 Acres)
1000 Lake Cook Rd, Glencoe, IL

Chiwaukum Prairie State Natural Area, WI 13 (168 Acres)
Al Kampert Trail, Pleasant Prairie, WI

Churchill Woods 14 (255 Acres)
900 W. Saint Charles Rd, Lombard, IL

Cuba Marsh Forest Preserve 15 (781 Acres)
24205 W. Cuba Rd, Deer Park, IL

Deer Grove East 16 (1,800 Acres)
1599 Pepper Tree Dr, Palatine, IL

Des Plaines State Fish and Wildlife Area 17 (5,000 Acres)
23432 W 171, Wilmington, IL

Dolton Prairie 18 (24 Acres)
1901 Dolton Rd, Calumet City, IL

Fel-Pro RRR Conservation Area 19 (277 Acres)
1520 Crystal Lake Rd, Cary, IL

Flint Creek Savanna 20 (17 Acres)
Cub Creek, IL

Foley Sand Prairie 21 (15 Acres)
Deer Grove, IL

Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve 22 (532 Acres)
509 IL-155, Prairie Du Rocher, IL

Gensburg Markham and other Indian Boundary prairies 23 (106 Acres)
15555 Mozart Ave, Markham, IL

Glacial Park 24 (3,439 Acres)
6705 State Rd 37, Ringwood, IL

Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area 25 (2,537 Acres)
5010 N. Jutgdon Rd., Morris, IL

Grant Creek Prairie Nature Preserve 26 (78 Acres)
24001 Lorenzo Rd, Wilmington, IL

Grigby Prairie 27 (44 Acres)
Barrington, IL

Hadley Valley Preserve 28 (726 Acres)
18311 Gourger Rd, Joliet, IL

Hanover Bluff Nature Preserve 29 (525 Acres)
Hanover, IL

Hickory Creek Preserve 30 (1,541 Acres)
20400 Wolf Rd, Mokena, IL

Hobart Prairie Grove Trail 31 (300 Acres)
Hobart, IN

Hoosier Prairie State Nature Preserve 32 (1,547 Acres)
135 E Main St, Schererville, IN

Illinois Beach State Park 33 (4,140 Acres)
1 Lake Front Dr, Zion, IL

Independence Grove Preserve 34 (1,151 Acres)
16400 Buckley Rd, Libertyville, IL

Indiana Dunes National Park 35 (15,000 Acres)
1050 N Mineral Springs Rd, Chesterton, IN

Ivahoe South Nature Preserve 36 (52 Acres)
Coffa St, Gary, IN

Jarrett Prairie Center 37 (400 Acres)
7993 N River Rd, Byron, IL

Kankakee Sands Preserve 38 (555 Acres)
Wilmington, IL

Kent Fuller Air Station Prairie and Tyner Interpretive Center 39 (32 Acres)
2400 Compass Rd, Glenview, IL

Kleempeken Prairie 40 (177 Acres)
1942 E Golf Rd, Des Plaines, IL

Lake in the Hills Fen Nature Preserve 41 (400 Acres)
1500 Jefferson St, Lake in the Hills, IL

Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve 42 (320 Acres)
Broadway St, Lockport, IL

Loda Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve 43 (12 Acres)
Loda, IL

Marquette Park 44 (52 Acres)
6743 S Kedzie Ave, Chicago, IL

Miami Woods 45 (116 Acres)
Calwedd Avenue and Oakton street, Morton Grove, IL

Middlefork Savanna Forest Preserve 46 (687 Acres)
1401 Middlefork Dr, Lake Forest, IL

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie 47 (19,000 Acres)
30239 IL-53, Wilmington, IL

Moraine Hills State Park 48 (2,200 Acres)
1510 S River Rd, McHenry, IL

The Morton Arboretum 49 (1,700 Acres)
4100 IL-53, Lisle, IL

Nashua Grasslands 50 (3,800 Acres)
2075 Lowden Road, Franklin Grove, IL

North Branch Preserve 51 (521 Acres)
11500 North Keystone Rd, Richmond, IL

Orland Grassland 52 (960 Acres)
167th Street & South La Grange Road, Tinley Park, IL

Pembroke Savanna 53 (86 Acres)
Pembroke Township, IL

Pleasant Valley Conservation Area 54 (2,080 Acres)
13191 Pleasant Valley Rd, Woodstock, IL

Powderhorn Marsh and Prairie 55 (192 Acres)
Chicago, IL

Prospect Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve 56 (5 Acres)
Paxon, IL

Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve 57 (413 Acres)
Easton, IL

Rollins Savanna Forest Preserve 58 (1,221 Acres)
20160 W Washington St, Grayslake, IL

Sand Prairie-Scrub Oak Nature Preserve 59 (1,460 Acres)
8998-6772 N Co Rd 1400 E, Kildeer, IL

Sand Ridge Nature Center 60 (235 Acres)
15891 Paxton Ave, South Holland, IL

Sauer Prairie Kame Forest Preserve 61 (71 Acres)
44W705 Lashier Rd., Sugar Grove, IL

Somme Prairie Nature Preserve 62 (74 Acres)
Dundee Rd, east of S Waukegan Ave, Northbrook, IL

Spring Lake Forest Preserve 63 (13,851 Acres)
Spring Lake, Barrington, IL

Springbrook Prairie 64 (1,829 Acres)
29W128 E 83rd St, Naperville, IL

Sunbury Railroad Prairie Nature Preserve 65 (12 Acres)
Ransom, IL

Theodore Marsh 66 (288 Acres)
Fox Meadow Dr, Crest Hill, IL

Vermont Cemetery Preserve 67 (37 Acres)
9945 Normantown Rd, Naperville, IL

West Chicago Prairie Forest Preserve 68 (353 Acres)
135 Industrial Dr, West Chicago, IL

Wolf Road Prairie 69 (80 Acres)
2901 Park Ave, Westchester, IL