



Whitefaced Meadowhawk

Bob Williams

Nippersink Creek

The main branch begins in a small sedge meadow in Alden, Illinois and winds its way through northern McHenry County to the Chain of Lakes. This 23-mile stretch of river encompasses a watershed of 138 square miles in two states.

In the 1950s floodplain wetlands were drained and portions of the Nippersink Creek were channelized in order to utilize more land for agriculture. This impressive engineering feat had unfortunate side effects upon the creek's ecology. The resulting severe erosion created silty waters and made banks too steep to accommodate natural flooding cycles. Invasive species moved in as well, crowding out the native plant life and leaving the area degraded and less diverse.

Today you will be paddling where two major restoration projects were conducted. The first innovative remeandering project took place from 1999–2001 and was done largely by Conservation District staff, volunteers, school students, and summer camp participants. The second project began in 2014, managed and funded in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As you try to identify different plant and animal species along the way, keep in mind that Nippersink Creek changes with the seasons and plants have varying bloom times, be sure to visit often. Please note, some of the shorelines are private property. Be considerate of our neighbors and remember this is also the home of our local plants and animals. Keep your trail beautiful — Leave no trace.



Prairie Blazing Star, Prairie Coreopsis, Joe Pye Weed



Big Bluestem, Virginia Wild Rye, Cardinal Flower



Switchgrass, Spiderwort, Belted Kingfisher



Bluegill, Orange-Throated Darters, River Otter



Green Heron, Bobolink



White Heelsplitter Mussel, Giant Floater Mussel, Painted Turtles



Dickcissel

1 Shoreline to Prairie to Kames
In the summer and fall, Nippersink Creek is lined by tall grasses and flowers that can only hint at the majesty of the 22-million acres of prairie that once covered Illinois. Prairies dazzled early settlers, and once they discovered the productivity of the rich prairie soils, land was parceled and plowed. Over the course of 200 years, Illinois lost all but 0.01% of its prairie. Original plots are rare, but many organizations and private homeowners are working to restore these native ecosystems. Along Nippersink Creek Conservation District staff hand seeded over 220,000 mesic and wet prairie species. As you head to the next stop, look for the tall bright yellow prairie coreopsis, purple prairie blazing star, blue spiderwort, and brilliant red cardinal flower. Grasses include the nearly ten-foot-tall big bluestem, beautiful Virginia wild rye, and the wispy and delicate switchgrass.

2 Near the Valley Road Bridge
In the 1950s, several sections of Nippersink Creek were channelized, wetlands were drained, and land was farmed. While the project may have contributed to the success of human inhabitants, it caused problems for the creek's ecosystem. The straightened creek moved very quickly causing erosion of the stream banks and making the water murky. Native plants and animals struggled with the change, and even people became disadvantaged as cliff-like banks prevented access to the shoreline. More importantly, the tall straight banks prevented floodwaters from spreading out across the natural floodplain and thus created flooding problems downstream. The Conservation District used early plat maps and aerial photographs to determine exactly where to dig the natural meanders back into the creek as the dechannelization project began. The meanders slowed the water, and the graded banks allowed natural flooding to return. Since this section was restored, we have been excited to see a diversity of wildlife thriving again in Nippersink Creek. Peer into the crystal clear waters to catch a glimpse of bluegills, catfish, orange-throated darters, giant floater mussels, and soft-shell turtles. Be on the watch for green frogs, painted turtles, green herons, and kingfishers. Maybe you will even see a river otter!

Riffles and pools
Riffles are shallow rocky areas in the stream where water becomes more turbulent. Due to the creek channelization, there were few riffles left in the swift moving Nippersink of fifty years ago. The Conservation District added four riffles to this portion of the creek and the Army Corps of Engineers has added seven more. Riffles are important because the turbulence helps to oxygenate the water for many stream dwellers and many insects lay their eggs in the slower rocky areas. They are also fun to canoe or kayak! This section of restored prairie has attracted several grassland bird species. Look for the black and white bobolink and the yellow cheeked dickcissel and listen for the high insect-like buzz of the grasshopper sparrow or the sweet "spring of the ye-ar" song of the meadowlark.



3

4 Near the Snowmobile Bridge
You are now entering the newly restored area completed by the Army Corp of Engineers 206 grant project. As you go under the snowmobile trail bridge, glance down the channel to the left at a remnant from when the creek was straightened. Notice how high the banks are here and along the first portion of creek past the bridge. Due to private land boundaries and drainage these areas were not included in the restoration. Contrast their appearance with that of the newly graded banks you will soon see. Gently graded banks are essential to allow natural flooding and to give wildlife essential access to the creek.

5 Open Views and Greater Diversity
If you have been down Nippersink Creek before you may be startled by how open and spacious this area is. Even if this is your first trip, you will notice the wide open views and lack of shade in many places. This area was recently crowded by invasive brush. Non-native species, such as buckthorn and Japanese honeysuckle, were brought to the United States as ornamental plants and were sometimes used as hedge row fencing. Since these species are native to a cooler geographic area and climate, they tend to start growing earlier in the growing season and out-compete the native plants for vital sunlight and nutrients. The plants invade and the area becomes thick with thorny brush. A lack of native plants and a lack of diversity threatens the abundance of wildlife that depend upon native plants for survival. The Conservation District actively removes and manages areas to keep invasives at bay.

Aerial photos courtesy of ENCAP

Cindy Smith



iPhone



Android

This trail is in the PSCC Hike App Trail System. Download the interactive trail guide app from the iTunes App store or Google Play.



McHenry County
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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Kevin Horner

A float down **Nippersink Creek**

Keystone Road Landing to
Lyle C. Thomas Memorial Park

Cindy Smith

6 Big Beautiful Old Growth Oaks

This ecosystem is referred to as an oak savanna. It is not a true forest but rather it is characterized by oak and hickory trees dispersed sparsely enough to leave sunlight available for a diverse array of savanna grasses, wildflowers, and native shrubs.

Look at the ground level for bottle brush grass, bright white boneset, and six-foot tall Joe Pye weed as well as hazelnut, wild plum, and hawthorn bushes. Look up in the trees for woodland wildlife species like red-bellied and red-headed woodpeckers, chickadees, wood ducks, and fox squirrels, which are a little larger than grey squirrels and have orange tinting on their faces and backs. Notice the lack of thick invasive brush here. Not only does it allow the native undergrowth to thrive, but it also leaves room and sunlight for young oak saplings to one day replace their grand ancestor oaks.



Wood Ducks

Fox Squirrel

American Hazelnut

7 Rural Farmland

Midwestern farms have been crucial to the development and prosperity of the United States. They are still vital to our food supply system and way of life. However certain agricultural practices can be detrimental to healthy natural ecosystems but there are environmentally sensitive ways to farm. Within the District's farm lease program agricultural lands follow environmentally-friendly practices that minimize degradation of soil and water resources, use buffers and grassy waterways, improve surface and ground water quality by encouraging adequate filtration, and use best practices in nutrient and pesticide management.

You will be arriving at Pioneer Landing within a few minutes. If this is your destination, thank you for taking the time to learn more about Nippersink Creek and we hope that you will continue to enjoy the benefits this beautiful and healthy waterway provides. Continue under the Pioneer Road bridge if you are continuing on your paddle to Lyle C. Thomas landing or Nippersink Canoe Base.



8

Mooove on Through — Cattle Crossing.

You will soon be approaching a fence line that prevents a local farmer's cattle from being able to leave his property by walking down the creek. There will be two sets of wire that extend across the creek. They are not taut and have sections of pvc pipe around them so that, depending on the level of the creek, you can either lift the pipe over your head and pass beneath, or you can glide your canoe over the pipe without harming your boat.

9 Living along a Waterway—the Town of Spring Grove

From the time the first Native Americans began settling in this area, people have chosen to live alongside rivers. Rivers provide essential resources, a means of travel, and easy access to recreation. The town of Spring Grove was built along Nippersink Creek and when Route 12 was built in its modern location, part of the creek was diverted and channelized. Notice the straight and high banks. To prevent continued erosion of the banks in town, some have been lined with rock or even old car tires.

Whether or not you live right next to a waterway, what you do at home can affect the health of your local creek or stream. Runoff from your driveway and lawn will eventually make it to the nearest waterway. Will it carry with it car washing detergent, oil, fertilizer, or pesticides? Water from your dishwasher and washing machine will re-enter the watershed. Will it carry harmful chemicals not removed by a water treatment facility or septic system? Excessive use of water puts a strain on our limited resources. Please consider these issues when making decisions at your home. Making a few small changes can go a long way towards protecting such a beautiful and valuable resource as Nippersink Creek.

Lyle C. Thomas Memorial Park & Landing, End of Tour

You are now approaching the landing at Lyle C. Thomas Memorial Park in Spring Grove. This landing is owned by the Village of Spring Grove but managed by McHenry County Conservation District. Cooperation between organizations and communities is important when preserving an ecosystem as large as Nippersink Creek. Restoration work is also cooperative. You have traveled areas restored by Conservation District staff, volunteers, school groups, and program participants, as well as by the US Army Corps of Engineers. By working together, we have successfully provided valuable habitat to wildlife of the prairie, woodland, wetland, and river. In addition, the creek ecosystem and its floodplain wetlands work to control flooding while providing a recreational waterway for people who wish to fish, canoe, kayak, birdwatch, and just relax.

Your landing at Lyle C. Thomas Memorial Park is just past the bridge on your left.

We hope you enjoyed your paddle on the creek and ask you to continue with your support of the preservation and restoration of natural areas in McHenry County for the benefit of present and future generations. If you would like more information on helping with ongoing restoration efforts, please visit our website MCCDistrict.org.

Final stop