

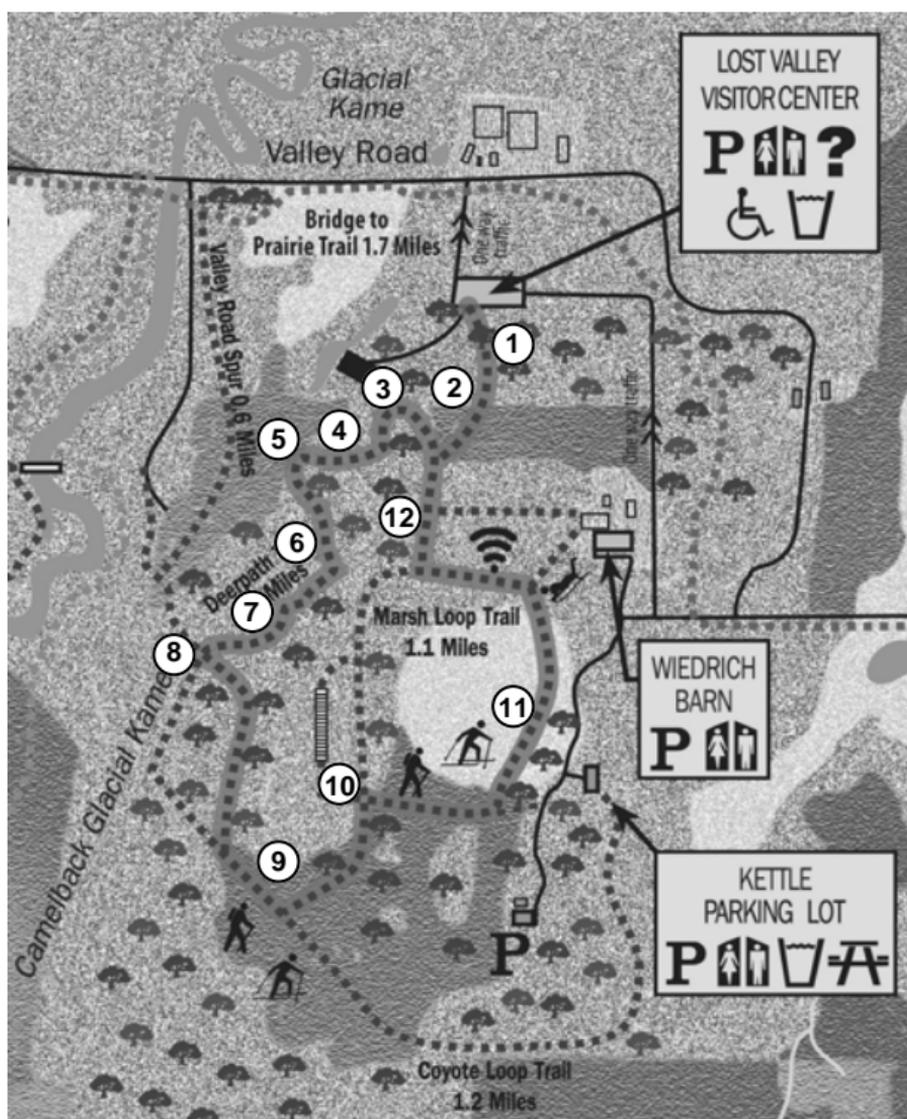
# Glacial Park Interpretive Trail: A History of the Land



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*A publication of the*  
McHenry County  
Conservation District  
[www.MCCDistrict.org](http://www.MCCDistrict.org)



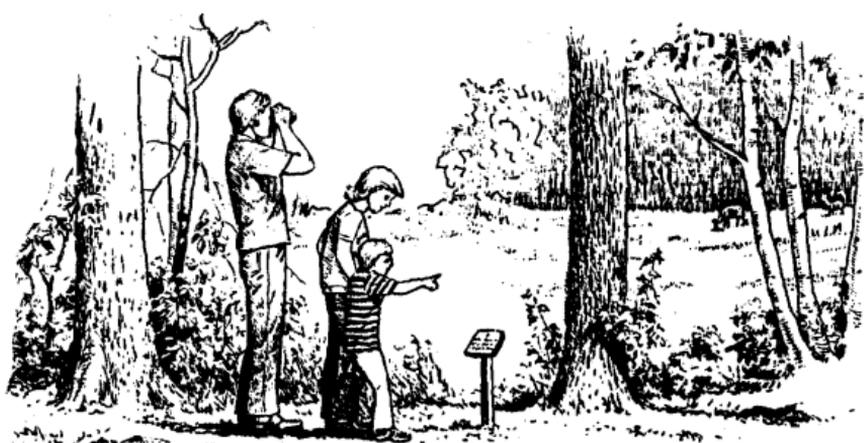


Please follow these trail rules:

- Stay on designated trails.
- Respect all plants and wildlife.
- Leave all natural items where you found them.
- Pets must be kept on a leash.
- Pick up after your pet.
- Use the trash cans and recycling bins at the trail heads and picnic areas.
- Be courteous to fellow park users.

# 1

## Welcome To Glacial Park



The land that is now McHenry County has changed occupants many times throughout history. It has gone from being home to Native Americans to pioneers, from pioneers to modern day farmers, and is currently changing hands from farmers to those who would build homes and businesses on the land. Each set of occupants has left signs of their impact on the land. The clues left behind help us to learn about our heritage and how we interact with the world around us. This brochure points out some of these clues and explains what parts of our heritage the Conservation District hopes to preserve, and what parts we are trying to reverse in order to preserve the county's natural history.

## Tallgrass Prairie

As you stand in what was once tallgrass prairie you may recognize some native prairie plants such as Indian grass or little bluestem. However, most of this area is covered with Hungarian brome, a non-native grass from Europe. Learn to recognize it from its curly, thin leaves. It was planted primarily for grazing cattle. Unfortunately, non-native plants can often be invasive, spreading quickly and out-competing native plants for space and essential nutrients. The Conservation District consciously removes certain particularly aggressive non-native plants. The plan to restore this area to tallgrass prairie, without brome, includes a regular schedule of prairie fires and a mixture of seeds of native prairie grasses and flowers.



*Little bluestem*



*Indian grass*



*Hungarian brome*



As you walk to the next sign post, look for Queen Anne's lace (in the summer), another non-native plant. It stands three feet tall and has a white flower that resembles a doily.

### 3

## Oak-Hickory Savannas

This area is a savanna, an open wooded area that provides an essential array of foods and shelter for woodland animal species. It also provided early settlers with shade, shelter, lumber, and firewood, ingredients for survival in the early wilderness. Today, these woods are not harvested for their lumber. Rather, the Conservation District manages the area so that the savanna remains the beautiful sample of oaks, hickories, and wildflowers that you see here. One major way to accomplish this is through prescribed burns. Setting fire to the savanna helps to clear the undergrowth and regenerate the soil's nutrients. An area is only burned once every two or three years and only under safe conditions by qualified and trained personnel.



As you head to the next stop, look for black fire scars on tree stumps or snags that were dead and dry when the fire passed through. How do you think the live trees survive? Hint: Feel the thickness of the bark of a bur oak and a shagbark hickory.

In the early 1800s, settlers introduced European and Asian species of buckthorn to America. By the early 1900s it was well established as an ornamental shrub and hedge row planting. People at that time did not foresee the problems this invasive shrub would cause. With a lack of natural predators and warmer growing conditions than in Eurasia, buckthorn spread quickly and thickly. Today, many native plants cannot compete for sunlight, water, and nutrients, and the invasives take over. The Conservation District is actively working to remove buckthorn from our native ecosystems and to replant native undergrowth such as grasses, wildflowers, and native shrubs.



***Buckthorn branch***



***Buckthorn branch  
with leaves***



As you walk along, look at woodland areas and compare areas thick with shrubs with areas carpeted with a variety of plant life. Which is more diverse?

## The Nippersink Creek

Looking down upon the Nippersink Creek, you see a lazy, winding waterway that traverses through flat prairie land. Before settlement, that is also what you would have seen. But for many years in between, the creek looked quite different. In the 1950s, due to an increase in wetland drainage in the area, settlers needed to get an increased volume of water out of the area more quickly. They straightened or channelized the Nippersink Creek. While this incredible task did accomplish its goal, it harmed much of the plant and animal life living in the creek. Increased speed of the water caused increased erosion and increased turbidity which is the amount of silt swirling in the water. Animals such as mussels or fish, sensitive to increased turbidity, suffered. Animals that had previously used the slow-moving backwaters of the creek as nurseries for their young no longer could. Land downstream flooded without a flood plain in this area. Today the Nippersink Creek flows in the path of its original meanders, or bends, thanks to a large scale restoration project by the Conservation District.



As you walk to number six, look up in the sky for waterfowl that once again find refuge in the meanders of the creek and the wetlands of its floodplain.

This prairie is more diverse than the one you saw earlier. Biodiversity, or a variety of life, is a trait essential to the survival of a healthy environment. In a monoculture, such as one with only Hungarian brome, a natural disaster that attacks brome would wipe out the whole system. A healthy prairie, with over 100 different kinds of species, can survive a single species' decline. In addition, a variety of plants can support a variety of different animals.



As you walk to number seven, count how many different kinds of plants you see.



Down this narrow path is a cemetery with five gravestones marked “Thomas”. The Thomas family was one of the first families to settle in this area, in the early 19th century. It is thought that they lived on the ridge in front of you, although no remnants of their house exist. Early life in the wilderness was difficult. Without heat, indoor plumbing, access to good doctors, and medicine, disease flourished. Five Thomas children never lived to see adulthood. The Conservation District placed gravestones here in 1995 as a tribute to this family and their frontier spirit and courage.



Signpost number eight is at the base of the large hill near the bench. As you walk , imagine that you are an early settler just arriving in this area. What do you see that you could use for food, shelter, and water?



Here you stand at the base of a kame, a gravel hill deposited by the glaciers over 10,000 years ago. In a way, you could call this an endangered landform. Many kames have been removed from our landscape by gravel mining. This is one of the last remaining in our area. Kames are a testament to the huge forces that once dictated the landscape that we still see thousands of years later.



You may choose to skip the steep route by walking the flat trail between the trees and the kames. It meets up with the other trail at the far base of the hill. After walking up over the kame, you once again can see the winding path of the restored Nippersink Creek. As you head down the hill on the other side, look for a windmill. Windmills have been used on farms for things from pumping water to grinding grain. It now serves as a reminder of our heritage and the ingenuity of our ancestors.



Facing the trail post, look for a man made box attached to the tree at the far right end of the line of trees. This box has been provided

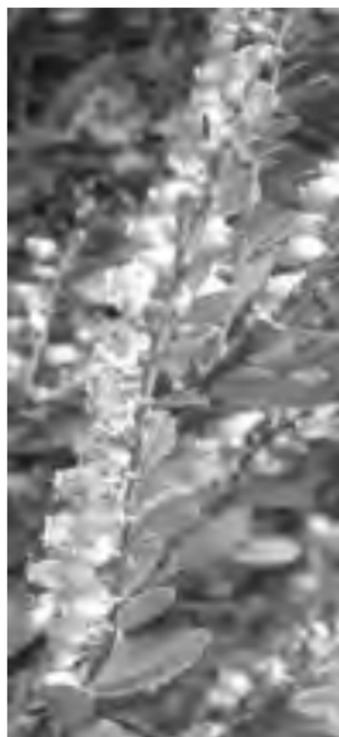
for bats. Through years of legends, pesticides, and habitat destruction bat populations have declined. The Conservation District has left up dead trees, set aside nonagricultural land and put up these bat boxes in an effort to preserve and restore the bat population while educating people on the facts of bats. Tropical fruit-eating bats are responsible for pollinating many important export crops and spreading the seeds of hundreds of rainforest trees and shrubs. Our local insect-eating bats provide excellent non-toxic insect control. One little brown bat can eat 600 mosquitoes in an hour! One big brown bat can eat 33,000,000 cucumber beetles in a lifetime, thereby protecting farmers from the second most costly pest in agriculture!



Throughout your hike, see how many dead trees you can find that have been saved for bats and other wildlife.

The boardwalk takes you out onto the bog. This is a very unique ecosystem that is dominated by sphagnum moss and leatherleaf, the latter being an Illinois threatened species. This bog at one time was used to grow and harvest cranberries by neighboring residents. Pioneer children were discouraged from entering the bog because of the danger of falling through the floating mat of vegetation. The tactic that parents would sometimes use was telling them scary stories of the Boggy Man. The name eventually evolved into the Boogie Man that we hear about today.

***Leatherleaf branch  
with flowers.***



Can you think of any other stories that have led to a fear and misunderstanding of nature?

After visiting the bog boardwalk, walk back up to the benches and head downhill to the trail directly across from you. Do not turn left on the Deerpath Trail.



Native Americans had a much more direct connection to the land than some of us have now. For example, we buy corn from a

grocery store, that got the corn from a distributor, who got it from a farmer, who had to plant it in his field. While Native Americans did cultivate vegetables in gardens, they could often just go out and harvest what was already growing. The marsh in front of you was a great place to collect food. Cattails had many uses such as flour, vegetables, and soup thickeners. Cattail leaves were also woven into mats that were used to cover wigwams, the dome-like dwelling used by local Native American tribes. Wigwams were also covered with birch bark (more common farther north in birch forests), elm bark, or mats made of rushes (a wetland grass). Arrowhead was used as a potato-type food. Even stinging nettle was very popular to eat as well as utilized to make rope.



As you walk along the edge of the marsh look for ways that this area has been altered by humans. Can you see any signs of ways which we have tried to improve the ecosystem?

The marsh you see in the depression below you was once drained and farmed. Much of McHenry County was wet, and in order to grow crops or build structures, settlers had to drain the water away. This was done through the use of drainage tiles, a sort of pipe. Originally made from clay, tiles were later made from concrete and plastic. Tiles are buried end to end a couple of feet under the ground, directing water to a channel or drainage ditch. While this aspect of human feat and technology has successfully made our area one of the top agricultural producers of the world, it has had adverse effects on wetland plants and wildlife. When the McHenry County Conservation District purchases lands and begins restoration efforts, drainage tiles are removed when it does not adversely affect neighboring land owners. Then wet areas are allowed to reflood naturally.



## Conclusion

As you head up this hill to get into your car and enter the modern world, reflect on your time here. Think about what the landscape that you drive through will look like in 10, 50, or 100 years. What would it look like if there had not been concerned citizens who set aside some land for the animals and plants to use for their lives, and for people like you to enjoy the fresh air and beautiful outdoors? The McHenry County Conservation District thanks you for your support.

Thank you for hiking the Glacial Park interpretive trail. We hope you have enjoyed your visit. You may keep this brochure for future reference, but if you do not want it, please replace it in the box so that others may use it.



**For more information, please contact**  
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