

THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

FALL, 1990

What to look for: prairie grasses

A child said, what is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child?
I do not know any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, Out of hopeful green stuff woven.

I believe a leaf of grass no less than the journey work of the stars.

Walt Whitman wrote these words. Great poets and ordinary mortals alike have found inspiration as well as sustenance in the life-giving grass at their feet.

"Prairie grasses belong to the widely distributed Gramineae family, to which domestic lawn grasses and most cereals (wheat, barley, rye, oats, etc.) also belong. Each grass plant has a single cotyledon (first leaf), usually a hollow stem which shows no secondary thickening, and flowers with parts in threes. Prairie grasses grow in clumps; they generally are wind pollinated."¹

Big
Bluestem

The most common and easily-identified grasses which flower in northern Illinois prairies, August through September, are:

Big Bluestem, Andropogon gerardi, also called Turkeyfoot because of its three-part reddish seedhead. Grows three to eight feet tall and has a dense root system extending six to seven feet below the surface.

Little Bluestem, Andropogon scoparius. Grows two to four feet and has rusty-red leaves with bluish-red seedhead in fall. It was once the most abundant grass in mid-America.

Sideoats Grama, Bouteloua curtipendula. Grows one to three feet. Has a purplish seedhead in season and the small oatlike seeds are carried on one side of the stem.

Switchgrass, Panicum virgatum. Grows three to five feet. Pale yellow leaves and seeds in fall. This delicate-looking plant has a way of creeping inside one's pants legs and tickling.

Indiangrass, Sorghastrum nutans. Grows three to five feet with a handsome bronze seedhead, glossy and six to ten inches long.

Prairie Dropseed, Sporobolus heterolepis. Grows one to two feet with pale pinkish gold leaves and seedhead. It grows in graceful, fountain-like clumps and its seeds are fragrant and tasty.

Best places along the Illinois Prairie Path to see these beautiful grasses in their fall colors are the prairie remnant or restoration areas in Elmhurst near Berkley Avenue, in Glen Ellyn at Taylor Avenue, in Wheaton at Volunteer Prairie south of the bridge as well as near President Street and near Hoffman Park, and of course in the wonderful West Chicago Prairie Forest Preserve adjoining the Geneva Spur.

Walt Whitman was right.

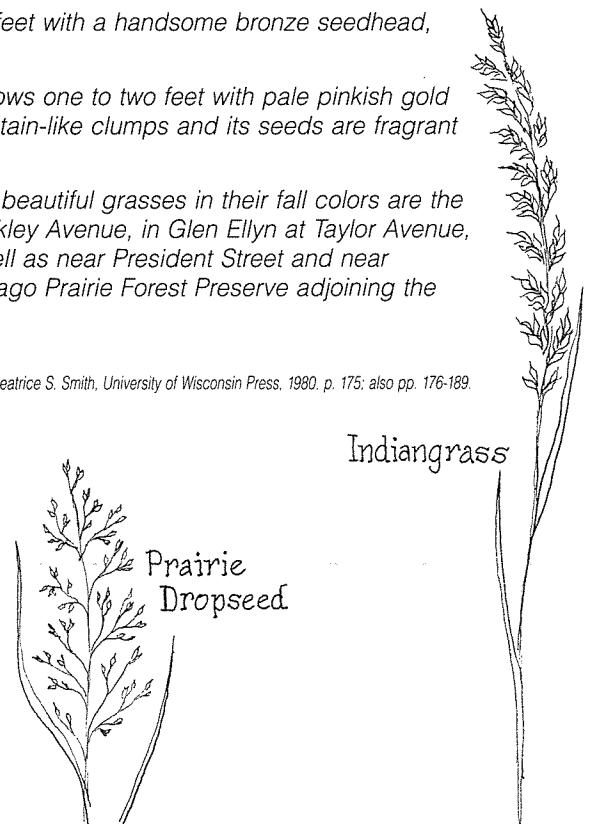
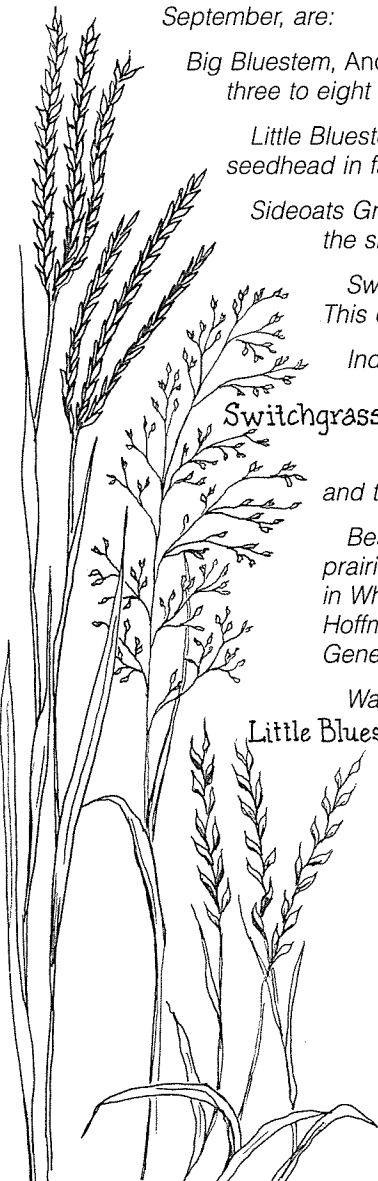
¹ The Prairie Garden, J. Robert Smith with Beatrice S. Smith, University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, p. 175; also pp. 176-189.

Little Bluestem

Sideoats Grama

Indiangrass

Prairie
Dropseed



West Chicago Bridge Now Open

The sun shone brightly on August 8 as DuPage County Board Chairman Jack Knuepfer cut the ribbon and officially opened the Illinois Prairie Path's newest and most beautiful bridge. The \$1.2 million arch-type structure spans two railroads, the Chicago and North Western and the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern, on the west side of West Chicago. It closes a major gap in the Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur and provides a direct route for West Chicago bicyclists to Geneva and the Fox River Trail. It also connects the city's popular Reed-Keppler Park with DuPage County's West Chicago Prairie Forest Preserve. This unique natural area is the largest high quality prairie remnant adjoining the Illinois Prairie Path, and with the opening of the bridge it will be more accessible to nature lovers. (For Fall field trips and other events on the West Chicago Prairie see page 4.)



Ready to cut ribbon are Mayor Paul Netzel and Chairman Jack Knuepfer (with his golden retriever Sasha, his companion on many a hike along the Illinois Prairie Path).

Geneva Spur would soon be surfaced and connected to the Elgin Branch of the Prairie Path. City Administrator Foster explained that West Chicago is doing its part by designating a bike route around the central business district, which should be marked with signs shortly.

The Illinois Prairie Path board of directors extends heartfelt thanks to Jack Knuepfer, the DuPage County Board, and the DuPage County Division of Transportation for this wonderful bridge. We believe the spirit of citizen and inter-governmental cooperation so evident here should bring the completion of the Geneva Spur sooner than anyone thought possible a few months ago.

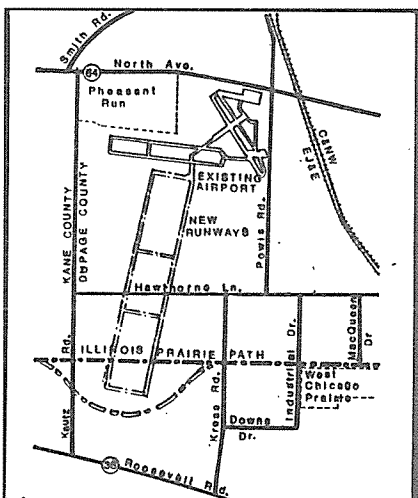
Representing the DuPage County Division of Transportation, which planned, supervised and funded the bridge project, were Donald Zeilenga, Director, and Chuck Tokarski, Chief of Traffic, Plans, and Program. Also attending to offer their congratulations were county board member Barbara Purcell, West Chicago Mayor Paul Netzel, and City Administrator Don Foster. Paul and Jean Mooring represented The Illinois Prairie Path board of directors; Sally Kirk, DuPage Clean and Beautiful; and LuAnn Bombard, the West Chicago Historical Museum. Since West Chicago is a famous railroad town, this handsome new bridge will help dramatize the part played by the old Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad in the city's history, and will certainly increase tourism.

Perhaps the most important attendees at the ceremony were cyclists and runners, representing appreciative Path users, for whom the bridge was built. They expressed the hope that the eastern section of the



East end of bridge. West end curves around Com Ed tower (upper left).

DuPage Airport Expansion Will Impact IPP



Proposed re-routing of Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur.

The DuPage Airport Authority has started work on the two new runways which will cross the Illinois Prairie Path Geneva Spur just east of Kautz Road (see map). The authority plans to add offices, industrial buildings, stores, a hotel, and an 18-hole golf course on 578 acres south of the existing airport in West Chicago.

The Illinois Prairie Path board of directors is concerned about the effects of the airport expansion on the Path: the proposed re-routing of the trail around the south end of the new runways, the airplane noise which may disturb Path users, and the possible hazards caused by planes taking off and landing across the right-of-way (which is owned by Commonwealth Edison Company with a 30-year lease to DuPage County for trail purposes). The bypass section would be 200 yards to 400 yards south of the new runways. It is important that the re-routed section through farmland have the same solid base of the present railroad bed to keep it from sinking into the mud. Other concerns have been expressed by county board members Mike Formento and Patricia Carr, who think that the airport authority has abused its power and should get county board approval before disturbing wetlands (as well as the Illinois Prairie Path) in the unincorporated area of DuPage County. The county board may take legal action to limit the power of the authority.

Is the Path for the Birds?

Hitchcock would have loved it. A beautiful summer day. A happy couple pedaling their bikes on the Illinois Prairie Path near Butterfield Road at St. James Farm. Suddenly Loretta Gaunt of Norridge, who is in the lead, feels something strike her

back, once, twice, three times. Annoyed, she looks back at husband Bill and asks, "Are you throwing things at me? Stop it!" Bill replies, "I didn't do anything. It's that bird, dive-bombing you. Here it comes again!" Shaken but uninjured, the two opt for a hasty retreat and, covering their heads as best they can, flee the battlefield. The proud Red-winged Blackbird returns to its nest and savors its victorious defense of home and family.

Further inquiry reveals that this tale is not as bizarre as it seems. Susan Terwedow, marathoner and illustrator of the *Newsletter's* front page, has encountered the feisty blackbirds while running on the Path near Glen Ellyn; and Dick Diebold, veteran cyclist and former board member, reports being attacked on other trails. The question remains: what can a beleaguered trail user do, short of shooting the poor bird? Any suggestions will be duly reported and much appreciated.

Blacktop Path at Pratt's Wayne Woods: Now You See It, Now You Don't

On June 18, the DuPage County Division of Transportation started installing a six-foot-wide blacktop path for bicyclists on 1.6 miles of the Illinois Prairie Path running through Pratt's Wayne Woods Forest Preserve. The plan was also to build a parallel 4-foot-wide limestone trail for horses and pedestrians adjacent, and parallel, to the bike trail. Thus all types of users could be accommodated on the narrow railroad berm through the marsh.



Cyclists enjoy a leisurely ride through the marsh on their short-lived blacktop trail.



Courteous equestrians walk their horses single file on the limestone trail leaving plenty of room for any cyclists on the blacktop to pass.

By the end of June when the blacktopping was completed from 1000 feet northwest of Powis Road to Dunham Road, bicyclists were feeling encouraged and hopeful that their need for a smooth surface undented by horses' hooves was being addressed. For the first time since the Path began twenty-five years ago they were able to ride comfortably through the beautiful forest preserve and marsh. Many of them did. In fact, the number of bicyclists riding on that section of the Path and discovering the new bridges and other improvements on the Path in Kane County increased greatly during July.

However, the equestrians in the Wayne area of Kane and DuPage Counties immediately began to complain that the smooth blacktop was causing the bicyclists to speed and endanger horses and hikers on the narrow trail. Although cyclists greatly outnumber equestrians and pedestrians on the Path in all sections, the horse people contacted members of the DuPage County Board and eventually won the day. By mid-August the whole blacktopped section had been covered with crushed limestone (CA-6) three inches deep and 10 feet wide,

topped with one inch of limestone screenings. The new surface will certainly slow the bicyclists, those few who don't mind the same old bumpy ride, and will be soft for the horses' feet. Time will tell whether the crushed stone will adhere to the blacktop or whether it will be loose and easily dislodged, causing users to slip and fall.

It is important to note that the DuPage County Forest Preserve District also has a major interest in this section of the Prairie Path because the berm impounds the water in Brewster Creek forming a marshy lake, an extremely valuable ecosystem. The water level is controlled by a weir in a box culvert under the Path. A water depth of at least three feet is necessary to attract certain rare birds to the marsh for nesting, including the Yellow-headed Blackbird and the Black Tern. Sometimes during heavy rains the water rises and spills over the top of the berm along one short section. Although both the IPP and forest preserve staff members had recommended raising the level of this lowest part of the berm at least six inches, the highway department opted to raise the new surface approximately four inches. As a result, a hundred-year storm flow in Brewster Creek will probably still go over the top of the Path.



New limestone surface is rolled as smooth as a sheet of paper. Two days later it was already badly dented by horses' hooves.

New Rte. 83 Bridge Opens in Villa Park



New IPP bridge at Rte. 83 towers over quaint old one, soon to be demolished.

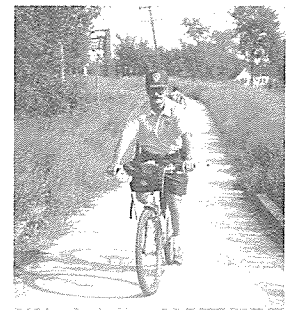
August 20th was the completion date for the bridge carrying the Illinois Prairie Path over Rte. 83, according to Paul Helmick, resident engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation. The finishing touches included installation of steel handrails on top of the concrete parapets (three-foot-high walls), grading of approaches and surfacing with limestone screenings. Still to come will be seeding the approaches with a prairie grass mixture which has already been used north of the Path near the Salt Creek bridge. The mixture includes little bluestem, leadplant, blackeyed susan, pale purple coneflower, New England aster, stiff goldenrod, and rye for initial cover. Ruth Ward of the Elmhurst Park District and the prairie stewardship group advised IDOT on the prairie restoration. The final task will be the removal of the twin 60-year-old Art Deco bridges that once carried the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad and the Great Western Railroad over Rte. 83. Some people may feel a twinge of nostalgia when these go. A comforting thought: flooded underpasses will soon be things of the past as well when Rte. 83 is raised.

Midwest Cyclery Aids Wheaton Bicycle Patrol; Lombard Begins New Patrol Program

An incident on the Illinois Prairie Path in the unincorporated area of Glen Ellyn this summer shows that there may be a need for better police protection. Although the Prairie Path is maintained by DuPage County and most of the right-of-way on which it is located belongs to the county, the county sheriff's department does not patrol the trail even in the unincorporated areas. Sheriff Doria states that the county board does not provide any funding for such an added responsibility. Therefore, this task has fallen on the various municipalities through which the Path runs.

The City of Wheaton Prairie Path bicycle patrol exemplifies an excellent program which is heartily supported by residents. One such supporter is Doug Jones, an owner of Midwest Cyclery, located at 229 West Front Street, Wheaton, who recently donated a mountain bike to the Wheaton Police Department. This is the third bicycle Jones has provided for the use of auxiliary officers who have been patrolling the Wheaton sections of the Illinois Prairie Path since the program began eight years ago. The officers in their summer uniforms (blue shorts and shirt) carry a handgun, portable radio, first aid kit and repair tools. Patrolling on summer weekends, they have an opportunity to meet and aid citizens on a friendly one-on-one basis and also get some exercise.

Other municipalities are beginning to patrol the trail too. Glen Ellyn conducts random patrols utilizing either squad cars or three-wheel motorcycles. Following Wheaton's example, Lombard has just begun a new bicycle patrol, more appropriate to a trail for non-motorized use only. Six officers have signed up for the program, which was proposed by Lieutenant Mike Kinney. The officers ride in pairs, equipped with bike helmets, radios, gun belts and handcuffs. They cover on a random basis the entire section of the Path in Lombard plus areas under construction downtown. The village may expand to a full-fledged patrol program next year. The IPP board hopes that the rest of the municipalities will follow suit.



Wheaton Bicycle Patrol officer rides through Volunteer Park.

Annual Meeting to be Held November 4

Path Vice President Bob Hargis promises an exciting program for the IPP annual meeting. He has invited Evan Kurrasch, who directs the Springfield office of the Illinois Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, to describe trails in progress across the state. Bob McCray, Chairman of the Trails Committee sponsored by the Conservation Foundation of DuPage County, will discuss his group's master plan for DuPage County biking-hiking trails. The Moorings will show slides of the year's Prairie Path highlights and there will be cider and cookies for all. Mark your calendars for an enjoyable Sunday afternoon: 2:00 p.m., November 4, DuPage County Historical Museum, 102 East Wesley, Wheaton.

West Chicago Prairie events

Seed Collection Sept. 9, 1-4 p.m.; Sept. 22, 1-4 p.m.; Oct. 6, 9 a.m.-12 noon; Oct. 20, 9 a.m.-12 noon; Nov. 3, 1-4 p.m.

Field Trips Sept. 22, 9 a.m.-12 noon Good displays of Asters, Bottle Gentian, Goldenrods, and tall grasses in seed.

Nov. 3, 9 a.m.-12 noon Something new and different. "What Flower Was This?" We will be looking at seed heads instead of flowers (just as striking and interesting) and enjoying the subtle colors of the prairie.

All events start from the northeast corner of the Electronic Support Systems parking lot on east side of Industrial Drive just north of Western Ave. and 1/2 mile south of Hawthorne. For field trip reservations call (708) 790-4912. Information: Mel Hoff, (708) 393-4715, or Mollie Millen, (708) 232-4394. Special trips can be arranged for groups.

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— Jean C. Mooring, Editor —

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