

Types of Prairies

black soil prairie

Features - The different prairie types are the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Black soil prairie was once the most abundant prairie type in what is now Illinois. Now it is among the rarest. The deep, loess soil of this land was left by the glaciers that covered most of central and northern Illinois. The flat landscape seen over most of the northern two-thirds of the state is where this prairie grew. Poor natural drainage in the black soil prairie resulted in wet conditions during part of the year. Also known as tallgrass prairie or Grand Prairie, the dark-colored, fertile soils found here were formed by the decomposition of vegetation, mostly prairie grasses and wildflowers.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Plants growing on the black soil prairie include big bluestem, Indian grass, white false indigo, prairie-dock, compass-plant, cup plant, Culver=s root, little bluestem, black-eyed Susan, sky-blue aster, prairie phlox, nodding onion, rattlesnake master, prairie gentian and many other species. Henslow=s sparrow, Virginia rail, least bittern, northern harrier and upland sandpiper are birds that may be present in this prairie. The badger, thirteen-lined ground squirrel and Franklin=s ground squirrel are typical prairie mammals.

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - Black soil prairie was once found in north central, central and south central Illinois. Today it is the rarest prairie type in the state. Most of this productive soil was converted to agricultural uses, and some has been taken over for urban development. The remaining high quality prairies in Illinois, less than 0.01 percent of the original prairies, are found in very small patches. Eighty-three percent of the remaining high quality prairies are smaller than 10 acres in composition, while 30 percent of these areas are less than one acre in size. Approximately 2,800 acres (both good and poor quality) of black soil prairies remain in Illinois. Below you will find a list of some black soil prairies still found in Illinois. For many of these prairies, you will need to call in advance to make arrangements before visiting the site. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

Brookville Lutheran Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve near Brookville in Carroll County
Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area and Goose Lake Prairie Nature Preserve near Morris in Grundy County (largest black soil prairie remnant remaining in Illinois)
Grant Creek Prairie Nature Preserve near Wilmington in Will County
Greenlee Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve near Cambridge in Henry County
Loda Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve near Loda in Iroquois County
McDonald Woods Forest Preserve near Libertyville in Lake County
Meadowbrook Park near Urbana in Champaign County
Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie near Wilmington in Will County
Morton Grove Prairie Nature Preserve near Morton Grove in Cook County
Munson Township Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve near Cambridge in Henry County
Nachusa Grassland near Franklin Grove in Lee County
Prospect Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve near Paxton in Ford County
Searls Park Prairie Nature Preserve in Rockford in Winnebago County
Sunbury Railroad Prairie Nature Preserve near Dwight in Livingston County
Weston Cemetery Prairie near Weston in McLean County
Wolf Road Prairie Nature Preserve near Westchester in Cook County

dolomite prairie

Features - The different prairie types are the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Dolomite prairies occur where the glacial debris is thin, and the dolomite bedrock is at or near the surface of the soil. These areas have a high magnesium content in the soil due to the weathering of the exposed dolomite bedrock. The extra magnesium favors a unique plant community, many of which grow nowhere else. Dolomite prairies may be found along the upper Illinois River in northeastern Illinois, where the plants grow in dolomite bedrock exposed by river erosion, and in a few other locations in northern Illinois.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Dolomite prairies support the growth of such plants as sideoats grama, prairie dropseed, Riddell goldenrod, porcupine grass, prairie Indian-plantain, silky aster, hairy beardstongue, Ohio horsemint, slender sandwort and round-fruited St. John=s wort. Animals and other organisms are typical of those found at other Illinois prairie locations.

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - Dolomite prairies may be found in northern Illinois, particularly along the upper Illinois River, where the plants grow in dolomite bedrock exposed by river erosion. A 1992 survey showed that only about 140 acres of dolomite prairie remain in the state and that most of these sites are very small in size. Below you will find a list of some dolomite prairies still found in Illinois. For many of these prairies, you will need to call in advance to make arrangements before visiting the site. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

Colored Sands Bluff Nature Preserve near Shirland in Winnebago County

Douglas E. Wade Nature Preserve near Byron in Ogle County

Flora Prairie Nature Preserve near Belvidere in Boone County

Hanover Bluff Nature Preserve near Hanover in Jo Daviess County

Jarrett Prairie Nature Preserve near Byron in Ogle County

Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve near Lockport in Will County

gravel prairie

Features - The different prairie types were the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Gravel prairies occur on gravel or soil which includes a lot of gravel, and the soils usually also contain a high calcium content. Most gravel prairies are rather dry, although there are a few moist soil gravel prairies. In Illinois, gravel prairies occur on kames (mounds or ridges of gravel left during the melting of glacial ice) and eskers (long, narrow ridge of gravel deposited by a stream flowing in an ice-walled valley or tunnel in a melting glacial ice sheet) in the northeastern part of the state. They also occur on gravel terraces along major rivers.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Plants growing on gravel prairies include prairie buttercup, little bluestem, sideoats grama, pasque-flower, prairie smoke, fringed puccoon, white goldenrod, Hill=s thistle, shooting star, blazing star, prairie dropseed, prairie cinquefoil, sky-blue aster, prairie gentian, purple coneflower, rattlesnake master, sand milkweed, scurf-pea, silky aster and hoary vervain. Some birds living in the gravel prairies are vesper sparrow, savanna sparrow, grasshopper sparrow and sedge wren.

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - In Illinois, gravel prairies occur on kames (mounds or ridges of gravel left during the melting of glacial ice) and eskers (long, narrow ridge of gravel deposited by a stream flowing in an ice-walled valley or tunnel in a melting glacial ice sheet) in the northeastern part of the state. They also occur on gravel terraces along major rivers. In 1992, there were approximately 148 acres of gravel prairies in Illinois. Below you will find a list of some gravel prairies still found in Illinois. For many of these prairies, you will need to call in advance to make arrangements before visiting the site. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

Bluff Spring Fen Nature Preserve near Elgin in Cook County

Carl and Claire Marie Sands/Main Street Prairie Nature Preserve near Cary in McHenry County

Douglas E. Wade Nature Preserve near Byron in Ogle County

Harlem Hills Nature Preserve in Loves Park in Winnebago County

Lake-In-The-Hills Fen Nature Preserve near Algonquin in McHenry County

Manito Prairie Nature Preserve near Manito in Tazewell County

hill prairie

Features - The different prairie types were the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Hill prairies formed on dry, southwest-facing hill tops above the floodplains of rivers, especially the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. Erosion in these areas carved steep hillsides. Hill prairie soils contain loess (fine-grained, wind-blown soil). Because they are hard to access some Illinois hill prairies have been saved from agricultural development. The majority of Illinois hill prairies today are less than five acres in size and about half of these sites are smaller than one acre.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Hill prairie plants are of three types: those typical of the western plains of the United States; those typical of the prairies; and those adapted to hill prairies. Plants growing in Illinois hill prairies include little bluestem, daisy fleabane, sideoats grama, leadplant, green milkweed, silky aster, pale purple coneflower, prickly pear cactus, heath aster, horsemint, June grass and lousewort. The coachwhip snake, ringneck snake, great plains rat snake, prairie kingsnake and ornate box turtle are all animal inhabitants of hill prairies.

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - Hill prairies in Illinois may be most commonly found along the Mississippi River, along the Illinois River from its junction with the Mississippi River to Putnam County and along the Sangamon River. They are also present in Coles and Vermilion counties and at scattered other locations throughout the state. Hill prairies develop on southwest-facing steep slopes where hot summer sun, dry winds and periodic fires keep forest species from growing there. Illinois currently has about 90 sites with good quality hill prairies. There are about 530 acres of hill prairies (good and poor quality) in the state. Below you will find a list of some hill prairies still found in Illinois. For many of these prairies, you will need to call in advance to make arrangements before visiting the site. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

Crevecoeur Nature Preserve near Creve Coeur in Tazewell County

Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve near Fults in Monroe County

Grubb Hollow Prairie Nature Preserve near New Canton in Pike County

Meredosia Hill Prairie Nature Preserve near Meredosia in Morgan County

Pere Marquette Nature Preserve near Grafton in Jersey County
Revis Hill Prairie Nature Preserve near Kilbourne in Mason County

sand prairie

Features - The different prairie types were the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Sand prairies developed on the extensive sand deposits that were left when the glaciers melted. They also formed on sand dunes that were blown up by the wind, such as along Lake Michigan. Well-drained, sandy soils are characteristic of sand prairies.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Plants that grow in the sand prairie are adapted to grow in well-drained soil. These plants are typically shorter than those in black soil prairies. Little bluestem, leadplant, green milkweed, butterfly weed, purple coneflower, sand primrose, prickly pear cactus, colic root, grass pink orchid, silvery bladder pod, blackjack oak, bearberry and winged sumac are all plants of Illinois sand prairies. The badger, Illinois chorus frog, common tern, western meadowlark, yellow mud turtle, bullsnake and western hognose snake are animals typically found in this prairie type.

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - Sand prairies are present along the Mississippi, Illinois, Green and Kankakee rivers and along Lake Michigan. Approximately 2,360 acres (poor and good quality) of sand prairie remain in Illinois. The majority of these sites are less than five acres in size. Below you will find a list of some sand prairies found in Illinois. For many of these prairies, you will need to call in advance to make arrangements before visiting the site. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

Ayers Sand Prairie Nature Preserve near Savanna in Carroll County
Bonnie=s Prairie Nature Preserve near Watseka in Iroquois County
Foley Sand Prairie Nature Preserve near Rock Falls in Lee County
Iroquois County State Wildlife Area near Beaverville in Iroquois County
Hanover Bluff Nature Preserve near Hanover in Jo Daviess County
Henry Allan Gleason Nature Preserve near Topeka in Mason County
Illinois Beach State Park near Zion in Lake County
Long Branch Sand Prairie Nature Preserve near Kilbourne in Mason County
Sand Prairie Scrub Oak Nature Preserve and Sand Ridge State Forest near Forest City in Mason County
Thomson-Fulton Sand Prairie Nature Preserve near Fulton in Whiteside County

shrub prairie

Features - The different prairie types were the result of variations in soil moisture, soil composition, geological substrate, glacial history and topography. Shrub prairie, as its name implies is dominated by shrubs and also by prairie grasses. The only examples remaining in Illinois occur on moist, acid, sandy soil, especially in the Kankakee area.

What lives here? - Because the prairie ecosystem is recently evolved, few prairie species are restricted to the prairie habitat and may be found in other habitats as well. Plants tend to be more characteristic of specific prairie habitats than animals. Typical plants of the shrub prairie include hardhack, bristly blackberry, wild lupine, American feverfew, big bluestem, running pine, box huckleberry, lowbush blueberry, black chokecherry, purple chokecherry, Indian grass, tubercled orchid, lance-leaved violet

and primrose violet. Animals that may live in the shrub prairie include the western harvest mouse, dickcissel (bird), smooth green snake and racer (snake).

Recreation - hiking, wildlife observation, photography

Locations in Illinois - Shrub prairie is very scarce in Illinois, and the prime example is Wilmington Shrub Prairie Nature Preserve near Braidwood in Will County. There is also some shrub prairie at Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve, near Wilmington in Will County. There are approximately 180 acres (good and poor quality) of shrub prairie remaining in Illinois. Please call in advance to make arrangements before visiting either of these sites. A local Illinois Department of Natural Resources= biologist can help you make the proper contacts.

