

the nature of Illinois

Spring/Summer 2026



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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

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The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is turning 75 this year, and we are excited to celebrate this milestone with you. What began in 1951 as an effort to preserve small natural areas in the United States for the purposes of research and education has grown and evolved over the years into a global full-throttle charge to take on the interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. This is the work of generations of scientists, policy experts, volunteers and supporters like you innovating and collaborating over the years.

We have come so far. Our work now involves everything from using cutting-edge technologies to protect our world-class freshwater resources from invasive species and bolstering the Great Lakes' fisheries to working with partners across the state to build more sustainable food and energy economies. We work to protect and understand systems, not just sites, that are essential for nature to thrive and connect us to our neighbors in nearby states and countries around the world. Take a moment to celebrate this important milestone and how far we have come!

In Illinois, we are getting an extra dose of celebration as our beloved Nachusa Grasslands Preserve is turning 40 this year! Can you believe it? For those of you who have been with us from the beginning of this journey of restoring thousands of rolling acres of tallgrass prairie on former corn and soybean fields, I am sure you feel it all went by in a blink. But you also know how hard-won each step of the restoration has been, acre by acre, seed head by hand-harvested seed head. TNC celebrates the perseverance and hope of the many people who have poured their time and knowledge into Nachusa Grasslands over the years.

At 75, TNC is not slowing down or resting on our laurels. We are rolling up our sleeves and digging into big goals, such as conserving 30 million hectares of freshwater bodies like lakes and wetlands and restoring as many river miles as would wrap around the globe 25 times over.

It is exhilarating when you think about the scope and sweep of all that TNC is doing. I hope what you read here will help you better see your part in all we have achieved and all we will achieve here in Illinois and around the world, for all the generations to come.

With warm regards,

Georgie Geraghty
Executive Director and Midwest Partner
The Nature Conservancy in Illinois



COVER PAGE Bison calves playing in a field © Charles Larry;
THIS PAGE Georgie Geraghty © 2024 Tony Tang Productions, Inc.



Celebrating TNC's Nachusa Grasslands

The preserve turns 40 this year

Grasslands protect against flooding, help clean drinking water and can store massive amounts of carbon, and yet only 5 percent of the world's grasslands are protected. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is working to protect many different grasslands at different scales around the world, from Mongolia's Eastern Steppe to TNC's Nachusa Grasslands Preserve near Franklin Grove, Illinois.

The area that would become Nachusa Grasslands harbored remnant prairie on rocky isolated cedar-covered hills and was deemed a good spot for TNC to pursue a medium-scale landscape restoration that could support a diversity of animal species. TNC was able to secure a total of 397 acres by December 1986.

Now celebrating its 40th anniversary, TNC's Nachusa Grasslands Preserve has grown to more than 4,000 acres, is among TNC's top visited sites in the United States and is heralded as a gem of tallgrass prairie restoration.

A rare community

While large expanses of tallgrass prairie remain in the western United States Nachusa Grasslands is one of the largest restorations of this habitat type on the eastern edge of its range. Nachusa Grasslands serves as an important research hub for scientists pursuing all manner of questions, such as the impact of reintroducing buffalo on plant diversity. Its culture of conservation excellence—with volunteers, staff, and scientists working side-by-side—is shaping best practices across TNC and the broader conservation world.

Less than one-tenth of 1 percent of Illinois' native prairie remains. "One tenth of 1 percent of habitat is not enough; hence, we're here trying to create new habitat," says Bill Kleiman, Nachusa Grasslands Preserve manager, in an interview for PBS' State of Change. "The balance needs to be towards being good stewards of the land and creating enough good habitat that species can continue to thrive." Learn more at [nature.org/nachusa40](https://www.nature.org/nachusa40).

Significant Nachusa Grasslands milestones

The achievements from the first 40 years at TNC's Nachusa Grasslands Preserve are too numerous to list, but here are some key highlights.



One of the first TNC projects focused on connecting habitat to generate a mid-size landscape for biodiversity.



One of the first conservation buffalo herds east of the Mississippi. Since 2014, the herd has grown to 100 head. Each year, some make the move from Nachusa Grasslands to grasslands stewarded by Indigenous Nations and communities through a partnership between The Intertribal Buffalo Council and TNC.



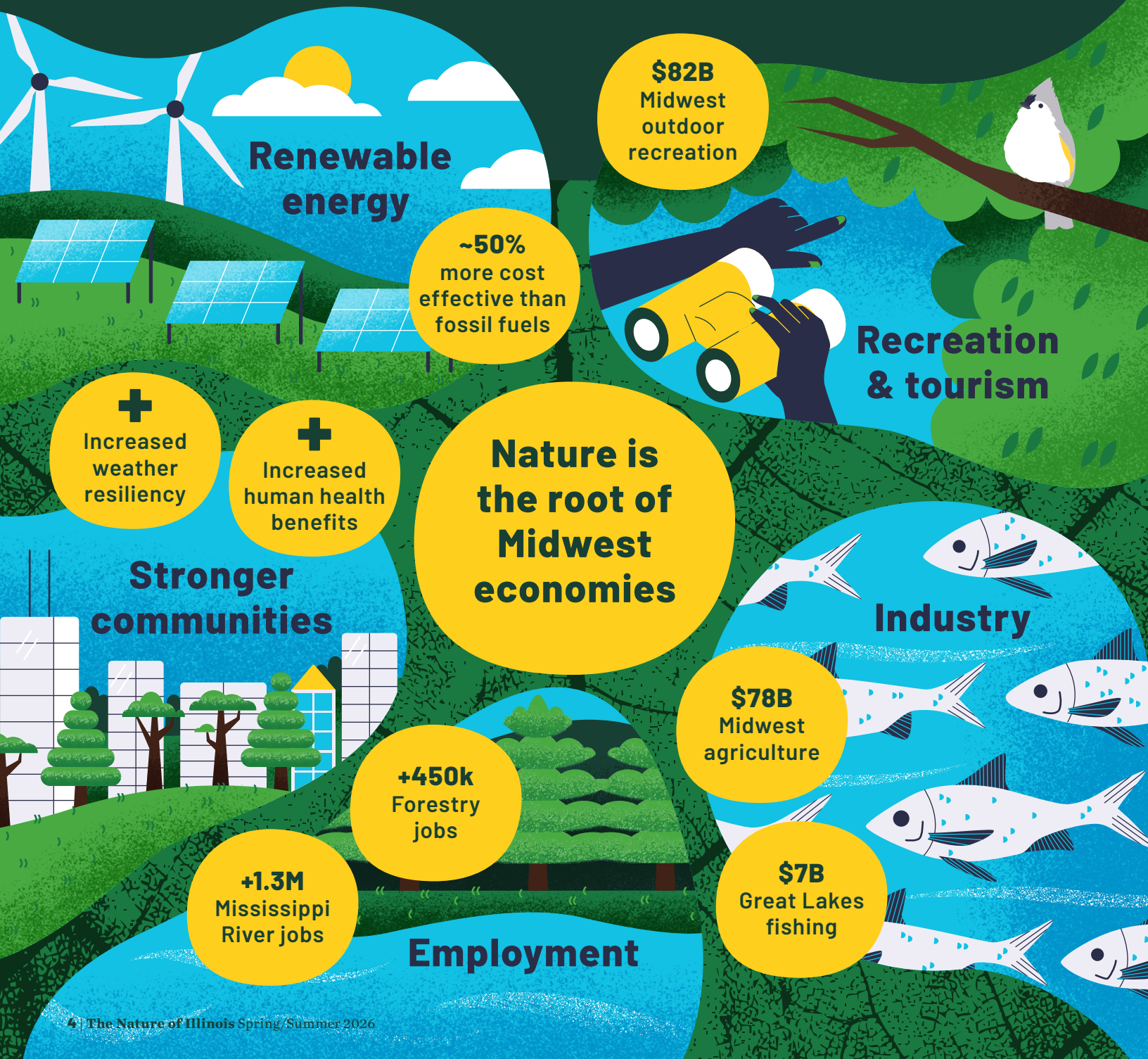
More than 100 scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals stemming from research conducted at Nachusa Grasslands.



Consistent Midwest leader in prescribed fire, with 2,225-acres burned in 2025.

Nature grows prosperity

By improving the sustainability of farming and fishing, protecting habitats, restoring freshwater ecosystems, incorporating nature-based solutions into major cities and advancing the transition to clean energy, The Nature Conservancy and our partners are helping Midwest economies—and nature—thrive.





Wetlands bring adventures—and economic gains

People can enjoy kayaking, birding and more at Illinois wetlands

Illinois has lost 90 percent of its historic wetlands, but the marshes, swamps and other wetlands that remain attract a variety of wildlife, including endangered species like Blanding’s turtles. These freshwater ecosystems are also popular destinations for outdoor enthusiasts, who boost the economy via spending on equipment and services like canoes and dining. In 2023, birders, anglers and other recreationists contributed about \$24 billion to the state’s gross domestic product, supporting about 173,000 jobs.

Indirectly, outdoor recreation may also lower healthcare costs by helping to prevent and manage diseases and conditions. “People are increasingly realizing the physical and emotional health benefits of being outdoors,” says Jeff Walk, Midwest strategy director.

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— Jeff Walk, Midwest Strategy Director

Through our work, TNC is helping to protect and enhance Illinois’ remaining wetlands. By attracting visitors, popular TNC preserves, like Emiquon, and other Illinois sites, like the Cache River Wetlands, serve as important hubs for regional economies.

TNC’s Emiquon Preserve

TNC restored the floodplain function on this former 6,000-plus-acre farm along the Illinois River. One of the largest wetlands in the Midwest, Emiquon provides habitat for hundreds of thousands of migratory birds and attracts about 60,000 human visitors a year.

Adventures galore can be found at Emiquon, including paddling, fishing, birding or hunting. Many visitors also just come to enjoy the natural beauty, from the sun setting over Emiquon’s backwater lakes to flocks of snow geese 100,000 strong blocking out the sky.

More at nature.org/emiquon.

Cache River Wetlands

Cache River Wetlands is a 45,000-acre bottomland forest and swamp, more like Louisiana than southern Illinois. Known as “a drowned land,” the Cache River is home to a variety of wildlife and the oldest trees in Illinois. TNC is part of a public-private partnership that protects and manages the state preserve.

Visitors might start at the Barkhausen-Cache River Wetlands Center to learn all that the area has to offer. One option: paddling miles through the swamp to see the state champion bald cypress tree, which is 1,000-plus years old. Another option: Walk along a short, accessible boardwalk to view ancient trees.

Close by the Cache River is the Shawnee National Forest, which looks a lot like the Ozarks with its rugged bluffs and lush forests. An estimated 1 million people visit the Cache and Shawnee areas every year—for the outdoor recreation, as well as wine tours, music and more. “I can assure you, visitors will find plenty to do here,” says TNC’s Tharran Hobson, southern Illinois program director.

Visit nature.org/cacheriver.

Tracking the invisible

Scientific innovations at TNC

At The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Illinois, we are using innovative technologies to gain insights about the places we protect and their diverse inhabitants, even when they're hard to see.

For example, millions of birds pass through Chicago during spring and fall migration, but many species migrate at night, when it is harder to get observational data. Luckily, the birds call out as they travel. Since 2023, researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Van Doren Lab of Migration Biology have captured this audio, as well as spatial information, at a couple dozen sites around the city. The sounds are processed by proprietary AI to identify the species and quantity of birds.

TNC joined the study in 2024, when an acoustic monitoring device was installed at Paintbrush Prairie just south of Chicago. Nearly 3,000 birds were detected over just three nights there during the peak of fall migration in 2024, with Swainson's Thrush, a songbird with a flute-like song, most frequently detected. "This software is capturing something that humans wouldn't necessarily be capturing," says Emilie Pfeiffer, TNC ecologist assisting the researchers. "There's such an incredible amount of these birds at night and

different species that this AI model is picking up so much more information than we physically can as humans."

Learn more at migrationbiology.org/chicago

Biodiversity in the water

At TNC's Emiquon Preserve near Lewistown, researchers are exploring how to use a different tool to survey biodiversity at the site: environmental DNA (eDNA). "As you are in an environment, DNA is all around you," says Kara Andres, assistant professor of ecology of human impacted systems at Illinois State University. The trace DNA left behind by organisms can be collected in environmental samples such as water and used to determine what species are present at a site.

At Emiquon, eDNA has the potential to augment other biodiversity surveying practices, like catching fish in nets, to increase the efficiency of data gathering in terms of both effort and cost. This approach could be used to monitor for the presence of a particular invasive species, for example. Or it could provide an overall snapshot by sampling certain areas at specific times, illuminating how different management approaches impact biodiversity at Emiquon over space and time. "We are excited to work with Dr. Andres to incorporate eDNA science into our conservation and management strategies," says Maria Lemke, director of conservation science for TNC in Illinois.

IMAGE CREDIT Flock of birds © Shari McCollough

TNC's Nachusa Grasslands crosses research milestone

TNC's Nachusa Grasslands Preserve has reached a significant milestone: 100 studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Studies at Nachusa have looked at everything from how to protect turtles during prescribed fire season to how restoration practices like high-diversity plantings or the presence of bison affect soil ecology—and that's just grazing from the very top. While the sheer volume of scientific inquiry is impressive, what is more important is how that research is advancing the field of conservation. "These studies truly integrate the forefront of scientific knowledge and land management action," says Elizabeth Bach, TNC ecosystem restoration scientist at Nachusa Grasslands Preserve.

Box turtle checkup © Philip Rudolph/TNC

Healthy reefs, healthy waters

Rebuilding reefs and fish populations

One of The Nature Conservancy's 2030 goals is to protect 10 percent of the world's oceans. Reefs are the heart of the ocean. The ocean's coral reefs and oyster beds shelter marine life and protect the shore by breaking up wave energy and storm surges. And while they only cover 1 percent of the ocean floor, coral reefs support 25 percent of all marine life.

Around the world, TNC's work in reef restoration takes different forms. In Hong Kong and coastal Georgia, recycled oyster shells are bundled together in woven bags and used as substrate to establish new shellfish reefs. Each recycled shell can support up to 20 new oysters.

In the Caribbean, Coral Innovation Hubs in The Bahamas, Dominican Republic and U.S. Virgin Islands are working on ways to accelerate coral reef reproduction. As of 2023, they had created more than 10 million coral embryos, of which nearly 700,000 successfully settled and grew on reefs.

Not-so-salty reefs

Reefs are also an important part of the Great Lakes. Rocky reefs in the lakes provide benefits similar to the ocean's coral and shellfish reefs, including critical spawning and nursery habitat for native fish species like lake trout, lake whitefish and lake herring.

Recently, The Nature Conservancy, in partnership with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians and the U.S. Geological Survey, completed a comprehensive multi-year study of spawning reefs in northern Lake Michigan to inform future reef restoration efforts. The team identified core habitat and produced detailed maps of 27 potential spawning reefs, also documenting the fish that use them and other species observed.




Up until now, studies of spawning reefs in the Great Lakes have focused on individual reefs, like the reef in Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay that TNC helped restore with many of the same partners in 2015. Scaling our work from a single reef to inform restoration efforts at the system level across the Great Lakes helps fill critical information gaps needed by agencies and fisheries managers to prioritize and plan reef restoration projects.





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Preserve nature for the next generation

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Red fox kits. © Donna Feledichuk/TNC Photo Contest 2023

