

The Nature of Illinois

Spring-Summer 2025

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The Nature Conservancy is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) international membership organization. Its mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

The Nature Conservancy meets all of the Standards for Charity Accountability established by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance. The BBB Wise Giving Alliance is a national charity watchdog affiliated with the Better Business Bureau.



Celebrating 25 Years of EMIQUON

The land that makes up The Nature Conservancy (TNC)'s Emiquon preserve has long been part of the Illinois River system. Yet a few decades ago, it didn't look much like a freshwater habitat. In the 1920s, levees severed the river from its floodplain to make way for farmland, a story that happened all over Illinois, which has lost 90 percent of its wetlands. Happily, the story at Emiquon is one of return—of a river to its floodplain, of a riot of nature to its waters, of a wetland to its people.

TNC is celebrating Emiquon's 25th anniversary this year. In 2000, TNC purchased the 7,600 acres about an hour southwest of Peoria. Under guidance of a TNC-led science advisory council and a community advisory council, restoration work began to successfully return the land to the river and the community. As water returned to the land, fish and wildlife returned in abundance, and people followed. On June 4, 2011, a dedicated public use area opened, offering better access to and views of Thompson Lake.

Printed on 100% PCW recycled, process chlorine-free paper, creating the following benefits:



12.9
trees preserved
for the future



970
gallons of
water saved



1,862.5
pounds of
CO₂ prevented

COVER Wildflowers, like the American lotus, grow in abundance at Emiquon. © Ian Adams; BOTH PAGES CLOCKWISE Emiquon supports an abundance of wildlife, as well as varied opportunities for recreation, education, and research. © Randy Smith/TNC, © Laura Stoecker Photography LTD, and © Illinois Natural History Survey staff



In 2012, Emiquon was placed on the List of Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, joining other wetlands around the world that are “important for the conservation of global biological diversity and for sustaining human life.” In June 2016, Emiquon’s floodplain habitat—including wetlands, prairies and woodlands—was reintegrated with the river via a novel water control structure called Ahsapa.

When floodplains flourish, so does nature

The Illinois River, thanks to the nursery function of its floodplain, was once an important fishery, producing 10 percent of all freshwater fish harvested in the United States in the early 20th century. “What drew us to Emiquon was the potential to restore

functional floodplain and the diversity and abundance of wildlife and plant communities that go with it,” says Doug Blodgett, senior advisor at TNC.

During the process of restoring the floodplain, TNC partnered with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to restock Emiquon’s waters with nearly 2 million fish of 34 native species, including a variety of game species, and others that are potentially at risk like the alligator gar. An additional 20 documented species have entered Emiquon through the managed connection to the river, including the paddlefish, a species as old as the dinosaurs.

A bird species which returned to Emiquon and highlights the high quality of the wetland restoration is the American coot. “They’re a surprisingly good indicator of water quality because they’re an

“Habitats like this don’t exist in many other places in central Illinois, or really in the Midwest.”

aquatic vegetation specialist,” says Randy Smith, TNC director of the Illinois Rivers Program. “When we have good habitat, we have a good number of coots.” At certain times during migration, Emiquon has been known to host 10 percent of the continental population of American coots. They are joined by other more secretive marsh birds, which are often threatened or endangered but thrive at Emiquon due to the quality of the habitat. “Habitats like this don’t exist in many other places in central Illinois, or really in the Midwest,” says Smith.

Creating a place for people and wildlife

Crucially, the local community has embraced Emiquon. The majority of the preserve’s 30,000 visitors come from within an hour and a half away, and many return half a dozen times a year. By working closely with the community, TNC was careful to develop the preserve so it also meets residents’ needs. Recreation opportunities like fishing, bird watching, paddling and hunting are all available. Educational opportunities for local students and other visitors exist as well, with interpretive panels discussing the importance of the river, including its history and future.

Researchers from around the country and the world are keeping an eye on the conservation science being done at Emiquon and another TNC site just 40 miles downriver, Spunky Bottoms. Levee restoration, which will help control sedimentation, and water control structure construction are currently under way at this similar, if smaller, site.

The celebration of Emiquon’s 25th anniversary year kicked off in February with the Fulton-Mason Eagle Day, where more than 500 people came to Emiquon to spot eagles on the ice and in nearby trees. More events welcoming the public to enjoy this remarkable place are planned throughout the year, but you don’t need to wait for an invitation to come visit. **Learn more at nature.org/Emiquon**

The Mississippi Flyway

A Bird Superhighway



Migration Pit Stops

Where can you see migrating birds in Illinois? Check out two hot spots:

- 1 TNC's Emiquon Preserve
on the Illinois River
- 2 Park 566 in Chicago
(and 90+ other Chicago Park
District natural areas)

Feathered Figures



~40%

Number of waterfowl or shorebirds in North America who use the flyway¹



96 million

Number of Americans who bird-watch²



\$279 billion

The total annual economic impact of birding to the U.S. economy²

References:

1. Helm, M. "5 things to know about the Mississippi Flyway as spring bird migration begins," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 6, 2024.
2. Wetzel, R. "Birding Is Soaring in Popularity with Sky-High Impact," U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Dec. 4, 2024.

Birds pictured, clockwise from top left: ruby-throated hummingbird, ovenbird, osprey, sanderling, baltimore oriole, green heron, scarlet tanager, tree swallow and cedar waxwing



More than 325 bird species migrate through the Midwest, along a highway in the sky called the Mississippi Flyway. They embark on long, perilous flights north to breed in the spring and then fly south when temperatures dip to overwinter.

During these epic journeys, they seek out rivers, wetlands, prairies, forests and other Midwest habitats for pit stops to rest and refuel. TNC and our partners are working hard to protect and restore these natural areas—and the birds who rely on them.

Learn more at [Nature.org/MidwestBirds](https://www.nature.org/midwestbirds)



Wings Over the Heartland

THE JOURNEY OF MIGRATORY BIRDS IN THE MIDWEST

The Mississippi Flyway is the largest of four migratory bird routes in the Americas. While flyways are not strict patterns, nearly half the bird species in the country—including 40 percent of shorebirds and waterfowl—travel somewhere along this superhighway. Every spring, hundreds of species like sparrows, plovers, hummingbirds and cranes will journey from their winter homes in South and Central America to their breeding grounds throughout the Great Lakes region and Canada.

Ducks, geese, shorebirds and other waterbirds follow the trail of rivers and lakes, whereas many other species seek out the forests and wetland habitats along the route. May is a particularly exciting month for Great Lakes birders, as it heralds the arrival of warblers, thrushes and orioles. These woodland travelers arrive in great numbers and fill our forests and parks with song and color.

Habitat for the Metropolitan Bird

Chicago is home to one of the largest park systems in the United States, with nearly 9,000 acres of parkland and nearly 2,000 acres of natural areas. These cherished green spaces help people connect with nature, address environmental and infrastructure challenges, and provide important habitats for wildlife. Since 2015, The Nature Conservancy has partnered with the Chicago Park District to engage the city's diverse communities in stewardship activities and promote equitable investment and care of these shared natural spaces citywide.

One such space is Park 566, a 70-acre prairie and savanna site within a connective greenway along Chicago's southern lakefront. Once the U.S. Steel South Works facility, the area is currently undergoing a major restoration process that includes treating invasives, planting native wildflowers, shrubs and grasses, and conducting controlled burns. As a birding hotspot, it's home to mallards, dickcissels and grasshopper sparrows, and it supports many Illinois threatened and endangered species, including the osprey, black-billed cuckoo, black-crowned night-heron and northern harrier.

Bird Spotlight

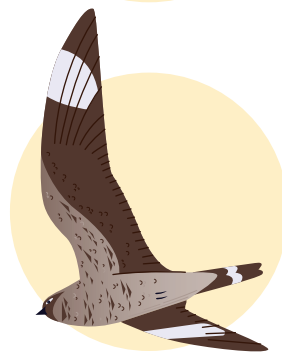
Short-eared Owl

Once abundant, short-eared owls are currently endangered in Illinois. They live in prairies and marshes, roost in grassy fields or pines, and migrate to the area beginning in March and April.



Common Nighthawk

Nighthawks are usually active in the dawn and twilight hours, and they start appearing in Illinois in April. They nest on the ground or on flat rooftops and have a distinctive "peent" or "beerp" call.



Celebrating Nature's Winged Marvels

There was no good reason for a short-tailed shearwater, an oceanic bird, to be skimming the surface of Lake Michigan on a frosty morning in December 2024. These charcoal gray birds with three-foot wingspans are Australian natives that migrate up the Pacific each winter to their Arctic feeding grounds. Which means the one Tarik Shahzad, an external affairs associate with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), spotted as his 294th confirmed species to clinch the 2024 Cook County Birding Big Year record was an ultra-rare sighting. In fact, it was the first-ever confirmed sighting of the species on Lake Michigan.



Conservation is a global practice

At TNC, Shahzad focuses on policy work in Illinois. “I get to advocate for nature here at home, where I grew up, which I think is really special,” he says. He started birding only a few years ago after he went on a guided walk with the Chicago Ornithological Society. The 27-year-old has been a naturalist all his life, but birding has sparked his passion. “It’s the best category of animal to become obsessed with,” he says. He is drawn to the aspect of luck in the sport, as well as the diversity across bird species that inhabit every ecological niche. As an urban birder, Shahzad has a chance to spot more than 300 species a year in Cook County, many of them migrating across thousands of miles. “They are global citizens,” he says. “I think they are the best messengers when it comes to conservation because conservation has to be a global, holistic practice.”



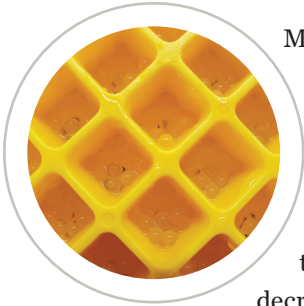
It takes a community

In the Chicago area, TNC helps to steward the Chicago Park District’s natural areas, which are great for birding. Sites along Lake Michigan are hotspots for migrating birds and prime ground for spotting elusive, rare birds—like the lost shearwater that may have been blown off course by a big storm—in addition to the typical resident and migrant species. Shahzad tied the record with a golden eagle sighting and a brant goose before that. That takes a lot of grit over an entire year. But it also takes community, with birders sharing intel on sightings. “The birding community was critical in helping me break the record,” Shahzad says. “It was really a community record.”

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE TNC birdwatchers Tarik Shahzad (left), external affairs associate, and Georgie Geraghty (right), executive director in Illinois; a dunlin; a sedge wren. All photos © Tarik Shahzad/TNC

Remembering THE WAY HOME

MULTI-YEAR PROJECT TO RETURN WHITEFISH TO MICHIGAN RIVERS SHOWS POSITIVE EARLY RESULTS



More than a century ago, lake whitefish used to froth up Midwest rivers in vast numbers each winter to reach tributary spawning grounds. However, early logging practices damaged these habitats and disrupted the process. Even after practices improved, whitefish numbers continued to decline from several factors, including decreased food sources due to the impact of the invasive quagga mussel. Habitat further upstream has more abundant food sources, but the fish don't know how to get there, as it is not where they imprinted upon spawning.

Partnering to build stronger whitefish populations

Inspired by the return of lake whitefish to spawning sites in Wisconsin rivers in Green Bay, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is hoping to support a similar return of the fish to spawning sites in Michigan rivers. TNC in Michigan, in partnership with the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, the Bay Mills Indian Community and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, has been experimenting with stocking key rivers with whitefish eggs, with more than 250,000 eggs stocked into Great Lakes tributaries since 2022. The scope of work recently expanded to translocating 125 pre-spawning adult lake whitefish from Lake Huron into the Carp River in 2024. Early tests show that young lake whitefish are being produced from these efforts. In a few more years, researchers will know if the fish successfully imprinted on their spawning site and are able to return to it.



Connected by Migration

The Midwest's vital connection to a new national park in Colombia

TNC and other partners helped establish Parque Nacional Natural Serranía de Manacacías in the Orinoquia region of Colombia, the culmination of more than 30 years of work. In the heart of a country that is home to an estimated 10 percent of the world's biodiversity, this new national park is an important step toward protecting and conserving at least 30 percent of the planet's land, sea and freshwater habitats by the year 2030. Spanning 168,476 acres, the park protects many lagoons and wetlands and is home to iconic species like jaguars and anteaters, as well as more than 460 bird species, 50 of which migrate to the Midwest each year.

Conservation strategies beyond the park border

Beyond the park's boundaries, TNC is helping the communities in the surrounding buffer area move away from water- and resource-intensive activities like palm oil and eucalyptus production through training and technical assistance programs. TNC-supported efforts in the buffer area also include regenerative agriculture and cattle ranching practices that ensure more sustainable management of natural resources.






LEARN MORE about the Midwest connection to Colombia and how generous donors made this new national park possible.
nature.org/ColumbiaConnections

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Young volunteers at Garfield Park in Chicago © Joshua Lott

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