Travel 70 miles due south of Chicago, and what might you find? Cornfields, yes. But in this familiar Midwestern landscape are also some surprisingly large swaths of increasingly rare natural communities. From prairies to wetlands to black oak sand savannas, there is much to experience here. This guide contains introductions to just a few of the many natural areas and species of interest in the Kankakee region. Please consider its brevity an invitation for you to share with us what excites you most about this region, and what other parts of its story you believe should be told.
Traveling south along the State Line Road, between Illinois and Indiana, past row upon neat row of corn and soy, it’s hard to picture this land as it once was: mushy, messy, and teeming with wildlife. Before European settlement, the Kankakee River meandered 240 miles west from its headwaters near South Bend, Indiana into northeastern Illinois to join the Des Plaines River and form the Illinois River. The river once coursed with so many kinks and bends that it created vast wetlands known as the Grand Kankakee Marsh. Nicknamed “The Everglades of the North,” the Grand Kankakee Marsh once covered between 50,000 and one million acres with interlocking wetlands, prairies, savannas, and woodlands. So abundant was the wildlife that settlers and visitors to the region reported skies blackened by the flapping wings of ducks and geese. Commercial hunting and draining of the marsh for farming eventually led to dramatic transformation of these lands.

Just a few miles west of the border between Illinois and Indiana, Momence Wetlands Nature Preserve offers a taste of the Grand Kankakee Marsh before agriculture dominated the landscape. These wetlands along the Kankakee River contain trees commonly found in floodplains: green ash, sycamore, silver maple, and eastern cottonwood. Pumpkin ash, swamp cottonwood, and sweet gum, more commonly associated with southern Illinois, grow here as well. An endangered wildflower is known as the Kankakee mallow because Langham Island at Altdorf in the Kankakee River is the only place in the world where it grows natively.

Wetlands are among the most productive natural communities on earth. Majestic waterfowl like great egrets and great blue herons feed on the fish and invertebrates that thrive here; these birds also rely on wetlands for shelter and nesting. Wetlands also provide a breeding habitat for the small but striking prothonotary warbler.

Standing on State Line Bridge over the Kankakee, the effect of humans on the landscape can be clearly seen. Look to the east, into Indiana, and you will see a straightened channel; look west into Illinois and you see the river taking its original meandering path. Over time and across the state line, people have disagreed over how to manage nature in the Kankakee Region. The Kankakee River Basin is home to rare and endangered plants and wildlife, but it’s also a place where people live, work, and play. The Kankakee is a source of pride locally, well-loved by boaters and sport fishermen, many of whom take it upon themselves to steward the river. They are among the many groups and individuals in both Illinois and Indiana with a stake in the river and its health. These days, folks are working across the state line toward river management that benefits people and nature in both states.

**DIRECTIONS:**
From Momence, take Rt. 1 to Rt. 114 and turn left (east). Take 114 to County Rd. E 1712 N. Turn north on this road and go 0.75 mile. The preserve is on the west side of the road.

**ACTIVITIES:**
Birding, boating, fishing, hiking. (Hunting permitted at Momence Wetlands Land & Water Reserve just to the west.)

**AMENITIES:**
Limited parking, no restroom or water

**MORE INFO:**
www.dnr.state.il.us

While much of the character of the landscape pre-European settlement was lost, much is now being regained. In Newton County, Indiana, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is now restoring 8000 acres to prairie that connects four other natural areas—Willow Slough Fish and Wildlife Area, Beaver Lake Nature Preserve, Conrad Savanna Nature Preserve and Conrad Station Savanna. The total connected natural area is 20,000 acres! Considering that less than a tenth of one percent of Indiana’s prairies remain, Kankakee Sands Efroymson Prairie Restoration is a particularly special piece of that puzzle.

How do you convert farm fields back to prairie? It’s not a simple or quick process, but The Nature Conservancy (TNC) staff are hard at work using a range of methods to create conditions that encourage biodiversity. TNC maintains an extensive native plant nursery. They collect seeds both from the nursery and from the wild, then sow them on more and more acres of former farm fields each year. TNC has planted nearly 6500 acres with the seeds of over 600 native plant species, including vibrant wildflowers and prairie grasses such as blue joint grass and porcupine grass. These grasses attract birds like the lark sparrow that nest here.

TNC staff must remove plants too. Some plants like reed canary grass and Canada thistle are invasive, meaning they spread quickly and crowd out the prairie plants that attract diverse wildlife. The site managers also nurture the prairie by giving it the periodic doses of fire that it needs. Prescribed fires are controlled and safe, and they simulate the wildfires that were once a regular part of the life cycle of this ecosystem. The restoration plan is attentive to hydrology as well. They’re restoring part of the site to wet prairie—appropriate, considering this is the former site of Beaver Lake.

DIRECTIONS:
From US 41 and Rt. 2, southwest of Lowell, IN, go about 13 miles south on 41. The project office is located in the large red barn on the west side of the highway. More detailed maps are available at the office.

ACTIVITIES:
Hiking, birding, volunteer stewardship

AMENITIES:
Limited parking, no restrooms or water.

MORE INFO:
www.nature.org/indiana

Porcupine grass has two fascinating ways to spread its seeds. At the end of the grass’s ripe seed is a barb that attaches itself to animals’ coats and travels with them. The seed’s own also forms a coil which can function as a “drill” that drives the seed down into the ground.

A pair of **regal fritillary butterflies** lands gently on a spire of **yellow false indigo**, their black and orange geometric patterns a striking contrast to the wildflower’s soft petals. One fritillary follows the other to a brilliant orange butterfly milkweed blossom where they find abundant nectar. As the weather warms, the **orange-fringed orchid**, otherwise rare in the Midwest, will join the mix of wildflowers here. Like many of the species found within them, black oak **sand savannas** are themselves increasingly threatened and rare. But just 75 miles south of Chicago, in Pembroke Township, are the finest examples of black oak savannas anywhere in the world.

The foundation was laid for Pembroke Township’s distinctive natural communities first by ice, then by fire. As the glaciers of the last Ice Age melted, they left behind lakes whose banks eventually eroded, causing a massive flood known as the Kankakee Torrent. The flood deposited large quantities of gravel and sand, which was then blown by prevailing winds into the dunes we see in Pembroke today. As prairie fires raged through, the dune shape provided natural firebreaks, allowing oak trees to mature while grasses burned. Thus, a kind of open woodland, or savanna, was created.

These sandy savannas have long supported a stunning array of intricately interconnected life. Below the wildflowers, **plains pocket gophers** burrow to make their nests, displacing the sandy earth as they go, cycling nutrients and air up and down, improving the soil’s drainage and increasing its fertility. Meanwhile, taking shelter in the gophers’ burrows are the speedy **six-lined racerunner** and the strange **western glass lizard**—a lizard that looks like a snake but has eyelids and ears. Here in Pembroke these reptiles are at the northern edge of their territory and offer a sample of the wildlife of warmer climes further south.

Pembroke Township offers a rare view of a rapidly diminishing rural landscape—islands of unusual topography and biodiversity in a sea of farmland. The rolling pattern of trees and grass, shade and sun, has a rhythm unlike that of the neatly ordered commodity crops, or the gently swaying prairie grasses, or the still shade of the forest. Maintained by fire first by American Indians, then by a community of African-Americans who arrived shortly after the Civil War (some of the first in this region), these savannas require continued attention and stewardship today.

To this end, conservationists and the sustainable farming community of Pembroke are seeking out and nurturing connections between ecological and human health, and between the rarity of the savannas and the special cultural heritage of the people who make their homes in and around them.

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PEMBROKE SAVANNA AND MSKODA
(THE NATURE CONSERVANCY)

The Nature Conservancy owns two sand savanna sites side by side in southeastern Kankakee County: Mskoda and Pembroke Savanna. At these sites, TNC staff are working to maintain rather than restore: they do so by performing controlled burns, removing invasive species, and working with local officials to discourage trespassing by all-terrain vehicles, which can do significant damage.

DIRECTIONS:
From the intersection of Rt. 17 and Rt. 1, go south on Rt. 1 for about 4 miles; turn east on 4000S Rd. Turn north on 12000E Rd. The entrance is about a half mile north of 4000S, on the west side of the road.

ACTIVITIES:
Birding, hiking, volunteer stewardship

AMENITIES:
Limited parking, no restrooms or water.

MORE INFO:
www.nature.org/illinois

SWEET FERN LAND & WATER RESERVE
(FRIENDS OF THE KANKAKEE)

Sweet Fern Land and Water Reserve, just a few miles east of TNC’s sites, is a testament to the power of an inspired individual’s vision. Marianne Hahn, a local conservation leader who was instrumental in the creation of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in nearby Will County, purchased a tract of land and is now working with TNC to restore and protect even more black oak sand savanna for future generations to enjoy.

This extraordinary land is home to at least 16 state-threatened or endangered plants, such as the plant for which it is named, the sweetfern. It is unusual to find sweetfern outside of the black oak savannas in the Kankakee Region. It does not handle shade well, so periodic prescribed fires are needed to sustain it into the future.

MORE INFO:
Visits can be arranged by contacting Marianne Hahn at 708-799-0249 or mariannehahn@sbcglobal.net.

KANKAKEE RIVER STATE PARK (IDNR)

There are many maps of Kankakee River State Park. The park’s official maps, of course, show horse riding trails, bike trails, cross country ski trails. Maps showing where and when to hunt deer, turkey, and pheasant. Then there are maps of different kind: morel hunters’ maps—sometimes drawn only in the mind, not put to paper—secretive and cryptic, rarely shared. Or fishermen’s maps, worn and torn and wrinkled from getting splashed, marked up with discoveries and tips from friends, each label calling to mind a great catch, or simply a good story.

The Kankakee River is remarkably clean, and is especially well-loved by wade fishermen. It is widely regarded as Illinois’ premier smallmouth bass stream, and holds past state records for several recreational species. 99 species of fish in 19 families have been collected in the Kankakee River. It is the only river in the state where the river redhorse is common. That the Kankakee supplies the Redhorse with the mussels, snails, crustaceans, and mollusks they need is an indicator of the health of the river’s ecosystem. The starhead topminnow, otherwise threatened in Illinois, is also able to thrive here.

This state park is a place where all kinds of people find ways to enjoy the river. One of the park’s most popular attractions for fishermen and hikers alike is Rock Creek, a tributary of the Kankakee that starts in the middle of the park. Walking along the creek, hikers can take in stunning views of a limestone gorge and waterfall.

It’s worth looking at Kankakee River State Park on a regional map, too: you’ll see it extends all the way to the northwestern edge of Kankakee County, and at its westernmost point, it’s less than ten miles from the vast Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. And to its east: the remnant and restored savannas, wetlands, and prairies of the former Grand Kankakee Marsh. The state park is therefore more than simply a popular recreational destination. It’s a link in a chain of natural areas that make this region an extraordinary place to visit and to protect.

DIRECTIONS:
Take I-57 to exit 315. Take Rt. 50 south to Armour Rd and turn west. Turn right (northwest) on Rt. 102. The park is located 7 miles west on Rt. 102.

ACTIVITIES:
Boating (canoe and kayak), camping, cross country skiing, fishing, hiking, horse riding, hunting, picnicking, snowmobiling

AMENITIES:

MORE INFO:
www.dnr.state.il.us

Freshwater mollusks are particularly sensitive to the effects of human development. It’s remarkable then that the Kankakee and its tributaries, just a stone’s throw from Chicago, host such a great number and variety of them, including the mucket mussel.

Photos: 1. credit: Illinois Department of Natural Resources