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## SUMMER 2008

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## At a Glance

## The Scene

The first national tallgrass prairie in the nation, once the site of Army ammo plant

## Highlights

Unusually large grasslands are habitat for rare birds

## Stats

19,000 acres (7,200 open to the public), 22 miles of hiking/biking trails

## Behind the Scenes

The Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995 transferred the land from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Forest Service

## Getting There

Take I-55 south from

## WEEKEND EXPLORER

✉ EMAIL STORY

## Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

by Christopher Johnson

[View Map](#)

When the explorer Jean Nicholas Nicollet gazed upon the prairie in the 1830s, he felt as if he were “moving from wave to wave over alternative swells and depressions.” For Nicollet, it was an experience that inspired “pleasurable and exhilarating sensations.”

Prairie restoration throughout the Chicago Wilderness region stirs similar feelings in those of us who love the prairie landscape. An ambitious restoration project is unfolding on the southern doorstep of Chicago, at [Midewin \(mih-DAY-win\) National Tallgrass Prairie](#). Midewin — a Potawatomi word that means “healing” — is the first national tallgrass prairie in the United States (it's owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service) and is a great jumping-off point for weekend exploring.

A trip to Midewin, about 60 miles southwest of Chicago, presents a unique blend of natural and human history. That's because Midewin's prairies are being restored on 18,000 acres that once hosted the [Joliet Army Ammunition Plant](#) from 1940 until the mid-1990s.

The centerpiece of Midewin is its prairies and wetlands, which visitors can explore on 22 miles of temporary trails. Many of the trails follow old Army roads and lead past wet prairie, marsh and sedge meadow, mesic prairie, and dolomite prairie.



Loggerhead shrike

Photo: Richard Day/Daybreak Images



Patrol Restoration

Photo: Bill Glass

sparrows, grasshopper sparrows, and many other species of grassland birds.

The eastern sector of Midewin provides an altogether different kind of experience — remnants of the Joliet Arsenal. According to Witt, “The Twin Oaks Trail, the Bunker Field Trail, and the Bailey Bridge Trail take you out to bunkers, where munitions were once stored. You can go into them and even climb on top, as the bunkers have been cleaned of contamination from the arsenal years.”

This part of Midewin is good for biking; the old Army roads pass prairies, wetlands, and land still used for

Just west of the Midewin Supervisor's Office on South River Road is the South Patrol Restoration area. According to Marta Witt, public services team leader at Midewin, “South Patrol Restoration is the foundational part of the restoration. It contains seedbeds for grasses and wildflowers.” From May until September, South Patrol blazes with the many colors of sunflowers, purple coneflowers, asters, phlox, milkweed, and other species.

As its prairies have been restored, Midewin has attracted growing numbers of [rare grassland birds](#). In fact, the site first came to ecologists' attention in 1982 when biologists visited it and noticed upland sandpipers. Birders will also observe loggerhead shrikes, bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, Henslow's

Chicago to Exit 241 (Wilmington). At top of ramp, turn left/east. Travel 3.5 miles on New River Rd to IL-53 and turn left/north. Continue 1 mile to Midewin Supervisor's Office, on east side of road

farming. Staff and volunteers at Midewin are gradually building gravel trails for biking and hiking, as well as bridges that will cross Prairie Creek, which intersects the site.

Staff and volunteers at Midewin offer a variety of guided tours on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Birdwatching hikes occur in May, June, and September, while heritage walks throughout the summer explore the region's agricultural past. The staff also sponsors Midewin for Kids, a variety of interactive workshops and activities. Starting in 2008, an innovative series will focus on spiders and their unappreciated role in prairie ecology. For information, call (815) 423-6370.

As Bill Glass, Midewin's resident ecologist, points out, "The value of restoration is that prairies are part of our past, and restoring them allows us to see what the land was like before it was plowed up and used for farming. Restoration also promotes biodiversity." Midewin gives us the rare opportunity to see the important work of ecological restoration in action — and on a scale found in few other places.



Midewin bunkers

Photo: FS Photo

### Roaming

Midewin is only one of several preserved prairies in the Joliet area. **Goose Lake Prairie**, 5010 N. Jugtown Road, Morris, (815) 942-2899, features the largest remnant of virgin prairie in Illinois. Its seven miles of trails lead through a tallgrass prairie with big bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass.

Next to Goose Lake Prairie is **Heidecke Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area**, (815) 942-6352, a 1,300-acre fishing lake that is stocked with smallmouth and largemouth bass, walleye, and muskie. A concession at the lake rents boats and motors.

**Pilcher Park**, 2501 Highland Park Drive, Joliet, (815) 741-7277, is great for kids. It has a nature center with displays of animals and plants, as well as five miles of hiking trails.

### Daytripping

The region southwest of Chicago offers up an unexpected bit of nostalgia — Illinois Route 53 is old Route 66, and nearby towns play this heritage to the hilt. **Wilmington**, two miles south of Midewin, features the **Mar Theater**, 121 S. Main Street, (815) 476-4662, which has operated continuously since 1937. **Water Street** is lined with antique stores that highlight 1950s memorabilia. One notable shop is the **Mill Town Market**, 508 Kankakee Street, (815) 476-0386.

The **Illinois and Michigan Canal** provides a revealing glimpse into Illinois' development as a hub of transit and commerce. One entry point to the canal is at **Channahon State Park**, 25302 W. Story Street in Channahon, (815) 467-4271, which is the official trailhead for 61 miles of hiking and biking trails along the canal.

### Foraging

Wilmington has a good, locally owned restaurant — **Haydens Crossing**, 107 N. Water Street, (815) 476-5925. Its friendly owner, Tom Hayden, is a fifth-generation descendant of original settlers of the area. **The Launching Pad**, 810 E. Baltimore Street, (815) 476-6535, is a 1950s-style grill that you won't miss because of the **Gemini Giant**, a 30-foot-tall rocket man who guards the entrance. Go south on Route 53 to Braidwood, and find the **Polk-a-Dot Drive-in**, (815) 458-3377, another Fifties grill that features replicas of Elvis and James Dean. For more sophisticated fare, try the **Country Mansion** at 101 W. South Street in Dwight, a half-hour from Wilmington, (815) 584-2345.

### Bedding Down

The place to go camping is **Kankakee River State Park**, 5314 W. Route 102 in Bourbonnais, (815) 933-1383, which lies right along the Kankakee River. Wilmington's only bed and breakfast, the **Chester Manor**, 116 E. Kankakee Street, (815) 476-1055, features comfortable rooms and private baths. Half an hour away is the **Reardon Historic Mansion Bed & Breakfast**, 4140 W. Route 6 in Morris, (815) 941-9100.

### Events

Wilmington holds its **8th Annual Catfish Days** on the weekend of July 20–23, with carnivals and festivities throughout the town. At Midewin, the **U.S. Forest Service** will put on public restoration seminars on July 26 and August 23 at 12:30 p.m., and a volunteer workday on **National Public Lands Day**, September 27, from 9:00 a.m. – 3 p.m.

**Related articles:**

[Midewin Releases Prairie Plan for Restoration and Development, CW Summer 2002](#)

[Nursery-grown Prairie Plants Return to MNTP, CW Fall 2002](#)

[Whoopers Land at Midewin, CW Spring 2005](#)

[EPA Denies Permit for Coal Plant near Midewin, CW Winter 2007](#)

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