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Catching Midewin Fever

In 1841, an intrepid traveler named Eliza Steele was riding in a stagecoach from Chicago to Peoria when the coach stopped near Joliet. Eliza looked out the window and was nearly overwhelmed by the beauty of the prairie outside. “Acres of wild flowers of every hue glowed around me,” she enthused, “and the sun was arising from the earth where it touched the horizon, was kissing with golden face the meadows green. What a new and wondrous world of beauty!”

Since then, most of Illinois's magnificent prairies have been plowed under or built over. Of 22 million original acres, only about 2,000 acres remain. Yet throughout the Chicago area, experts and volunteers have undertaken remarkable experiments in ecological restoration at numerous sites, including Somme Prairie Grove in Northbrook (which I wrote about for Chicago Life last year), Fermilab, and Morton Arboretum.

Yet southeast of Chicago, near Joliet, is perhaps the most extraordinary restoration project of all—Midewin (mi-DAY-win) National Tallgrass Prairie. It's extraordinary because of its size—18,000 acres—making it the largest ecological restoration east of the Mississippi River. Key to the restoration are the contributions of some 400 volunteers. Fran Harty, the Director of Terrestrial Ecosystems for The Nature Conservancy, which manages the volunteer program, says, “We call it Midewin fever.”

BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

Midewin is also extraordinary because of its history. From 1940 until the 1980s, this sprawling landscape was home to the Joliet Arsenal, where the U.S. Army manufactured all manner of munitions, from bullets to artillery shells.

Oh, and did I mention the capper? Last year, the U.S. Forest Service, which owns and manages Midewin, introduced bison to the property. This sprawling prairie joined The Nature Conservancy’s Nachusa Grasslands as one of two sites in Illinois that have returned these imposing mammals to their natural homes in the Midwest.

coneflowers, Turk's cap lilies, and sunflowers—a mélange of green, purple, orange, and yellow. The trails guide you gently past marshes and other wetlands.

When the Army closed down the arsenal, it removed ordnance and cleaned up contamination before turning the property over to the Forest Service in 1996. The agency christened its new property Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie—“Midewin” being a Potawatomi word that means “place for healing.”

What led conservationists to become interested in this site in the first place? Bill Glass, the Ecologist at Midewin, explains, “The arsenal was always known for grassland birds and for the grasslands that were here. People thought that here was an opportunity to make a large prairie restoration in the Prairie State.”

Photography by Gerald Heinrich
Congressman George Sengmeister, who was the local U.S. representative, took a keen interest in the property. Jerry Heinrich, a member of the Tall Grass Alliance who has volunteered at Midewin for many years, recalls, “Congressman Sengmeister saw the opportunity at that time to bring people with different ideas together. The plan that came out involved the creation of Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery. There was the need for preserving open space in this area. There was a need for disposal of the waste that would be generated from the 1,200 or so buildings that were here.” The plan also included two new industrial parks.

In 1996, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Illinois Land and Conservation Act, which established Midewin. The vision from the beginning was to restore native habitat, which is an incredibly complex task. William Jordan III, the Co-Director of the Institute for Nature and Culture at DePaul University, wrote in his fine book The Sunflower Forest, “Ecological restoration is the attempt, sometimes breathtakingly successful, sometimes less so, to make nature whole. To do this, the restorationist does everything possible to heal the scars and erase the signs of disturbance or disruption.”

To start, the scientists at Midewin had to figure out exactly what was there when Eliza Steele first observed the prairie. According to Glass, “We went and looked at the government land survey notes from the 1830s. A lot of what we based the restoration on was what those experts had found in terms of the plants and soils that were here.” Volunteers worked with the staff at Midewin to clear away invasive plants, broadcast seeds, and plant plugs, which are seedlings.

Midewin obtains their seeds by buying them, collecting them from wild areas, retrieving them from restored areas, and producing them at their two seed banks. “We will broadcast the seed in the winter,” Glass explains. “It’s a perfect situation. The seeds get buried to the right depth with the freeze-thaw action. We basically let Mother Nature do her work.”

A particular challenge at Midewin has been restoring lands that were once wetlands, which can range from marshes to bogs to wet prairies. Farmers had installed drainage pipes and tiles to

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carry away water during rainstorms. Paul Potts, the President and Executive Director of the Wetlands Initiative, a Chicago-based conservation organization, explains, “The first thing we had to do at Midewin was to restore the hydrology [the natural flow of water]. We had to figure out whether we were pulling up drain tiles, plugging them, or smashing them.” Volunteers then placed plugs of the plants that would thrive in the wetlands.

One of the major benefits of the restoration has been to attract more birds, making the site a Shangri-La for birders. Wade Spang, Midewin’s Prairie Supervisor, says, “We had some sandhill cranes stop in and visit us. We have a lot of migratory birds. It’s very important for us to build a habitat, so if the birds are able to make it back here, they’re able to breed, have their fledglings, and then have a chance in the world today.”

Another major benefit is to ensure clean water. Joe Roth, the Restoration Program Manager for Openlands, a nonprofit that works to protect green space in the Chicago area, remarks, “This area of Will County depends on ground water for the potable water supply. So we thought that having an area like Midewin would be like a large sponge—a large recharge area—that would be enhanced by the native plant restoration.”

In the fall of 2015, the evolution of Midewin took another leap forward when the Forest Service brought bison back to the property. The agency imported 4 bulls from Colorado and 23 cows from South Dakota. According to Rick Short, the Public Affairs Team Leader at Midewin, “The public has received the bison very well. We went from 10 to 15 people in the parking lot on a nice weekend day, and now we’re at 200 to 400 people in that parking lot.” The bison promote the diversity of the prairie because they graze on grasses, which tend to overtake prairies, and allow forbs and flowers to thrive.

The Forest Service and its partners have also worked hard to expand the recreational and educational programs at Midewin. Joe Wheeler, the Archaeologist at Midewin, notes, “Our most popular program is the Ghosts of the Munitions Plant. We take people through the housing areas and the bunkers. We also look at the agricultural heritage from 1840 to 1940.”

Midewin has even garnered national attention. The National Forest Foundation, based in Missoula, Montana, provides financial support and expertise for 14 restoration projects on threatened national forests—and one of those projects is Midewin. Mary Mitsos, the Executive Vice President of the Foundation, says, “We chose Midewin because it is the only tallgrass prairie in the national forest system, and it has such unique opportunities. We wanted to connect an urban audience to our national forest system.”

The foundation has been returning salmon to Tongass National Forest in Alaska and rebuilding trails in New Hampshire’s White Mountain. It’s thrilling to think that we Chicagoans now have a rejuvenated, magnificent prairie right on our doorstep—one that has joined the ranks of other national treasures.

*Reporter’s Note:* In 2014 in *Chicago Life*, I wrote about an oil spill into Lake Michigan from the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana (“Lake Michigan: A Crown Jewel at Risk,” Fall, 2014). In June of this year, the U.S. EPA announced a fine of $275,000 against BP for that spill.

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