Natural Areas of Cook County

Shoe Factory Road Prairie Nature Preserve

“This is one of the best prairie remnants of its kind that remains.”

Robert A. Evers, Illinois Natural History Survey
Perched atop a sand and gravel hill sits Shoe Factory Road Prairie, home to one of the rarest habitats in the Midwest. This hill (also known as a kame) was formed during the last glacial episode, when rocks, gravel, and sand pooled at the base of a glacial waterfall, leaving behind a neat, conical hill when the glacier retreated. The kame was then bare and exposed, and plants would have had difficulty growing here. Rain that fell upon its surface immediately drained away through the gravel and sand. Calcium dissolved from the limestone gravel and eventually accumulated in the thin soil layer, creating mineral concentrations too high for most plants to tolerate. Conditions on the crest and the southern and western slopes were especially arid and barren, made nearly inhospitable by winds and the midday heat. Only species adapted to these uniquely harsh conditions would survive; grasses like little bluestem, side oats grama, prairie brome, northern dropseed, and porcupine grass. Of the more than 100 prairie plants on this 9-acre kame today, many are rare or endangered, including the globally threatened prairie bush...
clover and woolly milkweed. Other prairie species here include wild false indigo, New Jersey tea, showy goldenrod, Seneca snakeroot, lead plant, blue-eyed grass, white and purple prairie clover, smooth, silky, and sky blue aster, yellow coneflower, western and prairie sunflower, and three species of blazing stars. Protection from the prevailing winds and prairie fires on the eastern slope of the kame were more favorable and they allowed trees to establish. Sprawling, 200–300-year-old bur oaks, with thick, insulating, cork bark, stared down the hottest prairie fires in these savannas. In moister, deeper soil, areas below the hill, grows tallgrass prairie, which eventually grades into highly productive wetlands in the lowest spots to the south of the preserve. These areas are undergoing ecological management and restoration that includes seeding, prescribed fires, and exotic invasive species and brush removal. From the hilltop preserve, take in the view of the surrounding 600 acres of prairie and oak savanna, and then consider the majesty and unique history of the geology and botany lying at your feet.
Directions

Take Shoe Factory Road to small roadside parking area ½ mile west of Sutton Rd. Nature Preserve is on hilltop on south side of road.

Prairie photos courtesy of Noel Kingsbury, Dale Shields, and Steve Flexman. All other photos by INHS staff.

GPS: N 42.061°, W -88.2006°