

# Wildlife Habitat in Illinois

Making the connection between land and water



Prairie Rivers Network is working to improve the condition of land along rivers and streams that will result in **cleaner water** and **healthier environments** for people, fish, and wildlife

Prairie Rivers Network is Illinois' advocate for clean water and healthy rivers. The 120,000 miles of rivers and streams flowing through Illinois provide drinking water to our communities, homes for fish and wildlife, buffers for flood waters, and natural areas for hikers, canoeists, anglers, and families.

For rivers to remain healthy, citizens must stand up for them—for 45 years, Prairie Rivers Network and our members have done just that, protecting our rivers and streams for people, fish, and wildlife.



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## Cleaner Water through Wetlands, Forests, and Prairies

**Wetlands** are defined as areas with moist soils, saturated or inundated with water and supporting water-loving plants. Historically, wetlands were viewed as an uninhabitable hindrance to development and agricultural production; thus, 90% of Illinois' original wetlands have been drained. Riverine wetlands have suffered due to river systems that have been severely altered for human uses. Now, wetlands are viewed as extremely valuable because of their capacity to filter pollution and provide natural flood protection.



**Forests** in Illinois have faced similar threats.

Deforestation, invasive species, and elimination of natural disturbance (e.g., fire) pose problems with remaining forest lands throughout the state. This can have serious consequences for wildlife, as 3/4 of Illinois' wildlife species require forest habitat. Deforestation often results in fragmented habitats, making it difficult for species to effectively migrate or respond to changes in climate. In addition to wildlife values, forests contribute to improved water quality through streambank stabilization, erosion control, and the absorption of pollutants carried in runoff.

**Prairies** are large, generally treeless areas, composed of a variety of grasses and flowers. This habitat type once dominated the Midwestern landscape, particularly in Illinois; however, of all Illinois' native habitats, prairies have faced the most widespread destruction due to land use changes. Much like wetlands and forests, prairies along rivers and streams have the ability to reduce erosion and absorb pollutants from runoff.



## How You Can Help

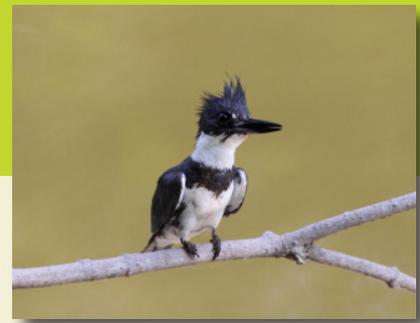
**Protect your land** - Enroll your land in a voluntary conservation program or consider permanently protecting your land from development through a conservation easement.

**Get involved** - Volunteer at a local park or natural area. Agencies and organizations often need help from motivated community members to carry out restoration projects.

**Have a voice** - Contact your elected officials and let them know that natural habitats and open space are vital to the health of the environment and quality of life for Illinois citizens.

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## Current Conservation Challenges

- Invasive species – Non-native, plants and animals threaten the ecological health and integrity of the high-quality habitats that remain within the state.
- Lack of conservation funding – Since 2009, Illinois has ranked among the lowest in terms annual open-space acquisition spending. Over the past 5 years, many dedicated sources of conservation funding have been underfunded, or completely unfunded.
- Habitat fragmentation – With the expansion of agriculture and development, contiguous habitats are becoming increasingly fragmented and isolated, causing problems for species mobility and adaptation.
- Climate change – Unprecedented changes in climate throughout the Midwest will likely place additional stress on terrestrial habitats and water resources. Increases in temperature and drought frequency will likely impact populations of plants and animals.

To achieve high quality wildlife habitat at a sufficient scale to improve water quality, Prairie Rivers Network focuses on conservation efforts that bring together public and private lands.

## Public Conservation Efforts

- Many examples of high-quality, native habitats occur on publicly-owned lands. Land management agencies and organizations work together to expand, connect, and manage a patchwork of diverse habitats throughout the state.
- In 2005, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources outlined a long-term habitat conservation strategy designed to keep declining species from becoming threatened or endangered.

## Conservation on Private Lands

- 90% of land in Illinois is under private ownership, highlighting the need for widespread conservation practices on private lands.
- Some agricultural landowners in Illinois have enrolled in voluntary conservation programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program. These programs provide incentives to agricultural producers to take a portion of their land out of production for a variety of environmental benefits.
- Some landowners interested in placing the highest possible protections on their land opt to place a conservation easement on their property. An easement is a conservation agreement made between the landowner and a land management agency or land trust that prohibits commercial and industrial development on the land.



## Habitat Quickfacts:

- The EPA estimates that 1 acre of wetlands can store 1.5 million gallons of floodwaters.
- Illinois is home to over 50,000 different species including 400 bird, 200 fish, and 60 mammal species.
- Over 4% of native species in Illinois are at risk of extinction.
- Forests along rivers are home to more overwintering bald eagles than any other state outside of Alaska.
- Over 320 bird species use the Mississippi River corridor for spring and fall migrations.

**For more information on habitat conservation in Illinois, please contact:**

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