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## GOOSE LAKE PRAIRIE STATE NATURAL AREA: Tallgrass Trail



### KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

**LENGTH:** 2.4 miles

**CONFIGURATION:** Loop

**DIFFICULTY:** Easy

**SCENERY:** Tallgrass prairie, marshes, ponds, historic cabin, observation deck

**EXPOSURE:** Completely exposed

**SURFACE:** Mowed grass

**HIKING TIME:** 1.25 hours

**ACCESS:** The park is open from sunrise to sunset; the visitor center is open 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

**FACILITIES:** Restrooms, picnic areas, a beverage vending machine, and a visitor center with exhibits

**MAPS:** Park map usually available outside visitor center; USGS topo Coal City, IL

**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** Pets must be leashed. Contact the visitor center at (815) 942-2899 or visit [www.dnr.state.il.us](http://www.dnr.state.il.us). For more hiking in this park, see profile 53 (page 252).

### IN BRIEF

While making your way through this hypnotic tallgrass prairie, you'll skirt the edges of several marshes and ponds active with birds. For those interested in improving their prairie-plant identification skills, this hike offers a nice variety of grasses and flowers, as well as some interpretive signs to get you started. Near the end of the hike, the trail passes a reconstructed version of one of the earliest log homes in the county.

### DESCRIPTION

There's a good reason why Illinois holds the position as the nation's top producer of soybeans and the second largest producer of corn—it's the sea of grass that once dominated the state. It wasn't just any grass that made the soil so fertile, but big, hearty tallgrasses like big bluestem, Indian grass, and prairie cordgrass. Thousands of years of these grasses rotting on the ground created rich, dark soil more fertile than other grasslands farther west. Along with being more fertile, tallgrass prairies are considered by many to be the most dramatic type of grassland. This is especially true during mid- to late summer, when 10-foot-high grasses and an abundance of flowers decorate these vast spaces.

### UTM Trailhead Coordinates

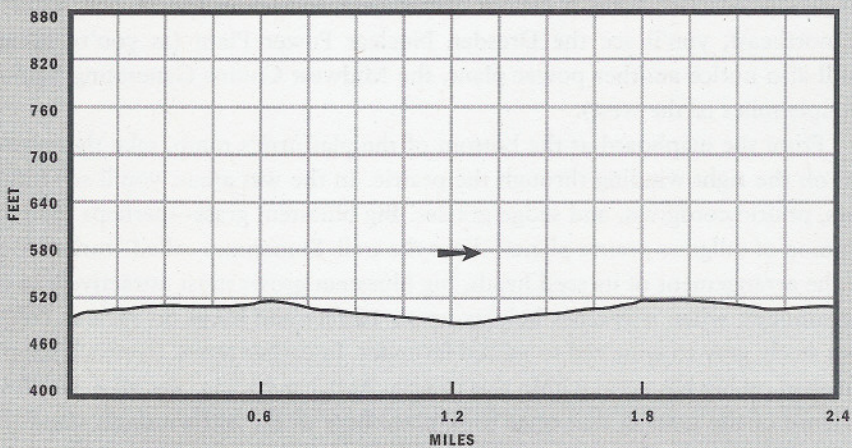
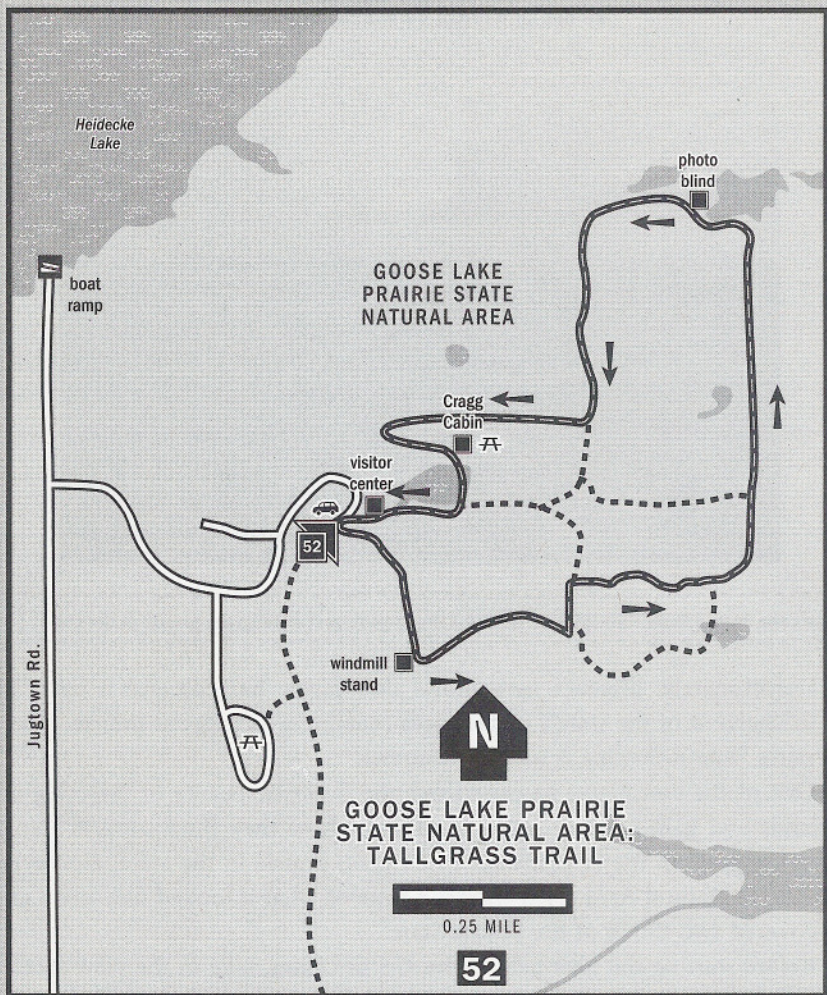
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### Directions

**From Chicago, take I-90/I-94 south to I-55. Follow I-55 south for 51 miles until reaching Exit 240. Take Pine Bluff–Lorenzo Road to the right (west) for 2.9 miles. Turn right (north) at the sign for Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area (North Jugtown Road). Proceed ahead for 1 mile and then turn right (east) at the sign for the visitor center.**





Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area contains the largest tract of tallgrass prairie in the state.

Unfortunately, Illinois's agricultural dominance has come at a cost. With only 0.5 percent of the state's surface area remaining as tallgrass prairie, it seems the Prairie State nickname is now a misnomer.

One of the best places to experience the dramatic beauty of these big open grasslands and gain a better understanding of how they function is within the Chicago region. As the largest tract of tallgrass prairie in the state, Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area gives visitors a taste of what it looked like when grassland covered two-thirds of the Prairie State.

Before starting the hike behind the visitor center, take in the view from the observation platform attached to the back of the building. If it's July, the prairie will be exploding with wildflowers of all shades; if it's September, goldenrod and compass plants will form a yellow carpet over the landscape. A few miles to the northeast, you'll see the Dresden Nuclear Power Plant (as you're hiking, you'll also notice another power plant, the Midwest Collins Generating Station, a couple miles to the west).

From the mapboard at the bottom of the platform's ramp, take the mowed trail on the right winding through the prairie. In the wet areas, you'll see Indian grass, prairie cordgrass, and sedge grasses. Big bluestem grass—perhaps the most common of tallgrass prairie plants—lines the trail. Sometimes called “turkey foot” for the arrangement of its seed heads, big bluestem grows most attractively in the late summer, when it reaches heights up to 10 feet and takes on various colors, from steely gray to wine red to muted lavender. In earlier times, livestock happily munched on big bluestem within this prairie. At 0.2 miles into the hike, you'll see evidence of the grazing that once took place here in the old windmill stand that pumped water out of the ground for the livestock.

After passing a couple of smaller, cattail-fringed marshes—one with open water—a sign indicates that the trail heading to the right is closed. You can still

proceed ahead but must turn back once you reach the marsh because a bridge is in need of repair. Taking the next right brings you to the other side of the marsh, where a rebuilt covered wagon with a bench inside is situated on a slight rise above the open water. Given the scarcity of trees near the pond, the wagon's canopy provides a welcome shady spot when the sun is hot overhead. In the vicinity of this marsh, I've seen great blue herons, a kingfisher, and a foot-long snapping turtle that became utterly peeved when I attempted to touch its shell.

From the pond, stay to the right as you start the large rectangular loop. During the summer, tall compass plants grow on this section of trail, as do small crab apple trees and an attractive grass called Canada wild rye, which has a large, bushy, nodding seed head. Also, black-willow shrubs grow near the patches of open water on the left side of the trail. As the path curves left, a cattail marsh with open water appears on the right. The enclosed photo blind provides benches and small viewing doors that allow you to discreetly observe action in the marsh. After passing another marsh on the right, look for obedient plants during late summer (lavender, tubular flowers lined up on the stalk). This northern section of the park is dominated by Indian grass, which is often hard to identify until August, when the reddish-brown tassels and small yellow stamens come into bloom.

Finishing up the rectangular loop, turn right on the gravel trail, which leads along the backside of the Cragg Cabin, a replica of one of the first homes in Grundy County. The next left takes you to the cabin. Originally built by the Cragg family in 1830 and located south of the park along the Mazon River, the cabin became a stopover for travelers and for cowboys who herded cattle from St. Louis to the stockyards of Chicago. The cabin, which sits at the edge of this pleasant pond bordered by a quaking aspen and willows, has been reconstructed a couple of times, most recently in 1980 by the Youth Conservation Corps. The small interior of the cabin is laid out much like it would have been 175 years ago, with a bed frame, a fireplace, and a ladder leading up to a second-floor loft. Stay to the right after the cabin, and you'll hike along the edge of the pond back to the visitor center.

## NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Not far from Goose Lake Prairie, the town of Morris hosts Gebhard Woods State Park, a small but pleasant park that adjoins a stretch of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Trail. Inside the park, the 0.8-mile Nettle Creek Nature Trail runs along the winding creek and through stands of maple, cottonwoods, and sycamores. On the east side of the park, toward downtown Morris, is an old stone aqueduct where the I&M Canal flows over Nettle Creek. Morris, the Grundy county seat situated on the north bank of the Illinois River, was one of many towns that grew up alongside the I&M Canal. To reach Gebhard Woods from Goose Lake Prairie, take Pine Bluff Road to the right (west) for 5 miles to IL 47. Turn right (north) on IL 47 and continue over the river and into Morris, turning left (west) on County Road 2 (West Jefferson Street). Proceed 0.9 miles and turn left (south) on Ottawa Street. The park is just ahead on the left.