



Hickory Hills Highlights

Hickory Hills Chapter - Illinois Audubon Society

Stewards of H & B Bremer Wildlife Sanctuary

Hillsboro, Illinois

Winter 2024 - 25 Edition

Bremer Sanctuary was donated by Helen and Betty Bremer to the Illinois Audubon Society piece by piece until the entire 203-acre property was finalized in 1977. Hickory Hills Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society was founded in 1980 and is responsible for caring for the property. Volunteers meet Tuesday and Thursday mornings to maintain the property for the benefit of the plants and animals that call the sanctuary home. All activities are guided by the management plan composed by the Bremer Board and approved by the Illinois Audubon Society's Board of Directors. We continually welcome members of the chapter and of the society to join us at the barn to help with our daily and seasonal chores as well as the special events that take place periodically. New volunteers are always welcome.



Welcome to the Hickory Hills winter newsletter! Winter is here, and the natural world has responded by becoming dormant. In this newsletter there are articles about volunteer activities—both large and small—that have happened at Bremer Wildlife Sanctuary recently. Also included are events that will take place later. Stories about the natural world are presented. The authors of this newsletter hope you enjoy reading about the activities at Bremer Sanctuary. We are always interested in hearing your thoughts.

In Memoriam



On November 13, 2024, Bremer Sanctuary and the conservation community lost one of their greatest advocates. Henry Eilers passed away at his home after a brief illness. Henry was a pioneer of the conservation movement from the moment he immigrated from Germany to Illinois in 1955. He was a friend of Bremer Sanctuary long before it was called such. Before the Bremer girls donated their land to the Illinois Audubon Society, Henry was asked to help them find a recipient for their donation. He was involved with Bremer Sanctuary until he passed away; he was one of a few still active charter members of Hickory Hills Chapter. Wherever Henry went, he kept an eye out for interesting plants. His plant collection reflects his ability to spot unique and unusual plants. Henry was a mentor to many; his guidance was welcomed and will be greatly missed.

A Little Bremer History by Don Krefft

We have a great bunch of volunteers at Bremer, and Carl Savage is one who has been volunteering for a long time (dating back to the last century)! I recently asked Carl how the Owl Prowl got started. He said Vicki Hedrick came up with the idea about 20 years ago. Vicki headed the education program at the time. It was late fall when the event took place. Carl drove the tractor with Vicki and the Nokomis Ladies Club in the wagon. They headed out to the White Oaks Trail at the top end of Pipeline Trail. Carl was very skeptical that anything would happen. It was near dusk when Vicki started playing the owl call tape. Carl said it was incredible as owls started swooping in from all sides. One nearly buzzed him! The ladies and Carl were thrilled. Carl said they never went back at that time of year or to that location again as Vicki was concerned about disrupting the owls during mating season. The Owl Prowl is now held in early October and features guest speakers and feathered friends from Treehouse Wildlife Center in Dow, IL.



Carl with a couple of other Bremer Sanctuary "old timers"

CITIZEN SCIENCE

Our friends from the Springfield Audubon Society, stewards of Adams Wildlife Sanctuary at the IAS headquarters in Springfield, sent us one of their fall newsletters. In that newsletter they mention SAS's involvement in a citizen science project that they have been involved with for 13 years. This project is part of Cornell University's *Project FeederWatch*.

SAS volunteers started this project back in November, when they began monitoring bird feeders outside the headquarters' windows for three hours every other Wednesday morning from November through April. The goal is to identify and document all bird species spotted at the feeders. This information is

reported to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, operators of the program. Last season SAS volunteers tallied 28 species with an average of 59 birds observed each morning.

Anyone can participate in *Project FeederWatch*, which is a survey of birds that visit backyards, nature centers, community areas, and other locations across North America. The data gathered provides important information about bird populations. The findings for each season are published in "Winter Bird Highlights," a Cornell University publication. The Top-25 List for our region for last season can be found at this [link](#).

Check out this link to learn more about participating in *Project FeederWatch* <https://feederwatch.org/>. Sounds like a fun idea.



Our New President



Hickory Hills Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society has a new president! Last month our board of directors voted unanimously to elect Jim Hefley president of Hickory Hills. Jim has been active at Bremer Sanctuary since he retired from the Illinois EPA. Jim spent nearly 30 years working as an aquatic biologist sampling rivers and streams throughout the state. Previously he taught courses and workshops through EIU and McMurray College. He also worked in the Outdoor Education program at Allerton Park.

Today, Jim and his wife Tap keep busy with projects on their family hobby farm. He is also active with Scouting U.S. A. and is an avid backpacker. Jim is a second-generation volunteer following his father, the late James Hefley, who was a steward at Bremer Sanctuary for more than 20 years.

Annual Meeting and Program by Don Krefft



Members of the Hickory Hills Chapter were delighted by the performance of Brian "Fox" Ellis at the annual chapter meeting held November 3rd. Fox portrayed famous artist, naturalist, and ornithologist John James Audubon. With authentic costume and his French accent, this engaging program lasted an hour, and everyone

there would have been happy with a longer show. Mr. Ellis portrayed Robert Ridgway at the 2023 Annual Meeting to equally favorable reviews. We hope to have him return in November 2025, so be ready to be entertained and educated.



Bremer Sanctuary Celebrates the New Year by Jerry Prater

Bremer Sanctuary once again honored the birth of another year with the annual New Year's Day Walk. Thirty-five enthusiasts gathered at the barn ready to brave the mid-thirties temperature and a seventeen mile an hour wind.

New president Jim Hefley congratulated and thanked everyone for participating (and bringing lots of food) and outlined the plans for the morning. Jerry Prater then read an appropriately titled poem, "*New Years Day*" by octogenarian poet Jean Conner.

With coats buttoned up and scarves wrapped tight, the hikers split into two groups. Those wanting to do the long trail (Long Walkers), led by steward Ken Schaal headed for the Cress Creek Trail and the bottoms while the smaller group (the Short Walkers) with Jerry in the lead chose to enjoy a shorter circuit around the west prairie. The Short Walkers paused to check out the owl boxes and the observation tower while the Long Walkers headed along the west boundary toward the Northwest Prairie.

The Short Walkers finished the circuit and returned to the barn to tour the new maintenance and equipment shed and the warmth of fresh coffee. The Long Walkers arrived later—no worse for wear. Everyone shared a hot lunch of a potluck with a variety of soups and a salad. Lots of cookies and fresh fruit adorned the table as well.

Everyone enjoyed another start of a new year of fellowship and exercise and pronounced the day a great success.



A New Year's Day Walk by Ken Schaal

2025 got off to a good start as 18 guests took the long hike down to Cress Creek and on to the Northwest Prairie. Ken led the hike on a crisp but dry New Year's Day. Our goal was to be back at the barn in an hour for a lunch of chili and soups. At our first stop we saw a pile of feathers that indicated predation. Was the predator an owl or a hawk? It was hard to tell as both inhabit the sanctuary. Further along the trail we saw several piles of scat—probably left by coyotes. As we reached Cress Creek and crossed the low-water crossing, the large burr oak tree was mentioned. Don told us that its circumference is 16 feet, and the tree was more than 310 years old according to an estimate from the Morton Arboretum. Ken pointed out the route to take to reach the large burr oak. As our walk



continued, the biggest surprise was seeing a dead mole near the Bluebird Trail on the Northwest Prairie. Scratch marks found on the ground indicated that the mole had been dug up and left. An interesting find...The walk back to the barn around Pond #8 was pleasant as the chilly wind was now at our backs. After an hour's hike we were back at the barn where we had lunch and a nice visit.

Only In Illinois

Our own Bremer Wildlife Sanctuary has once again been featured in the publication *Only in Illinois*. This time the featured nature article was found in the October 2, 2024, edition of the online magazine. The article begins **“With 203 acres and more than 160 documented bird species, the Helen and Betty Bremer Wildlife Sanctuary in Illinois is always a fun visit.”** The article mentions some of the bird species found at the sanctuary as well as calling attention to the Bluebird Trail and the covered bridge. Timber Trail and Cress Creek are also mentioned in the article, which can be found by clicking [here](#). Kudos to Bremer Sanctuary and Hickory Hills!!



Activities & Events



40 Oaks Project by Henry Eilers

In 2016 the University of Illinois Plant Clinic is celebrating 40 years of service. Earlier this year, they had sent out invitations for proposals featuring some *special* oak tree and recording observations about it during this calendar year. They also suggested community participation. We, the Shoal Creek Volunteers, submitted a Blackjack Oak at the Shoal Creek Conservation Area, and our proposal was accepted.

Our oak is a rather small and scruffy tree, high above the Rocky Hollow inlet on a sandstone bluff. Two Litchfield High School students, Garrett Werner and Julia Brandtner, assisted in the monthly observations. We look forward to the final report and plan on sharing the results with our readers.



Since we are on the topic of trees, the following is a list of trees and native shrubs located on the **Bremer Sanctuary** property. This list was compiled in 1982 by Jim Kenney and Ken Schaal. A few additions were made before this printing, but this list is still believed to be accurate.

Black Oak	Black Walnut	Eastern Hophornbeam	Blackhaw viburnum
Bur Oak	Common Buckeye	Eastern Cottonwood	Crabapple
Chinkapin Oak	American Elm	Black Willow	Redbud
Northern Red Oak	Red Elm	River birch	Hawthorne
Post Oak	Hackberry	Osage Orange	Common Persimmon
Scarlet Oak	Red Mulberry	Black Cherry	Smooth Sumac
Shingle Oak	Box Elder	American Sycamore	Wahoo
White Oak	Red Maple	Basswood	Gray Dogwood
Pignut Hickory	Silver Maple	Sassafras	Rough-leaved Dogwood
Shagbark Hickory	Sugar Maple	Black Locust	Hazelnut
Sweet Pignut Hickory	Green Ash	Honey Locust	Eastern Red Cedar
Pecan	White Ash	Bladdernut	Jack Pine

The Northern Harrier: A Winter Visitor to Illinois Prairies

Winter casts its chilly spell over the prairies of Illinois, yet these open landscapes become a haven for wildlife. Among the many species that linger through the cold months, the northern harrier stands out as a fascinating bird of prey that enchants nature lovers and birdwatchers alike.

The northern harrier, scientifically known as *Circus cyaneus*, is easily identifiable by its distinctive appearance. With a wingspan reaching nearly four feet, this bird exhibits impressive agility in flight. Characterized by its long wings, a rounded tail, and striking facial disk, the harrier can be recognized gliding low over fields and marshes. Males usually display a gray plumage, while females flaunt a brown overall appearance, both equipped with white rumps that are a major characteristic of the species.



Photo by Kameko Walker

As autumn descends into winter, northern harriers make their way to Illinois grasslands and prairies, searching for suitable hunting grounds. These open areas, with their rich biodiversity, provide ample opportunities for the harrier to hunt small mammals, such as voles and mice. The prairie landscape, dotted with tall grasses and low shrubs, allows this raptor to soar, hover, and swoop down on unsuspecting prey, demonstrating its remarkable hunting prowess.

For nature lovers, winter brings a unique opportunity to observe these elegant hunters in their natural habitat. To spot a northern harrier, patience is key. Early mornings and late afternoons are the best times to witness their graceful flights. Birdwatchers often find themselves captivated as the harrier effortlessly glides just above the grass, scanning for movement in the underbrush.

Moreover, the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan recognizes the importance of preserving habitats like the prairies, which are not only critical for the northern harrier but support a myriad of other wildlife species. Conservation efforts in the region are crucial to ensuring that winter visitors like the harrier continue to thrive. Various organizations, including the Illinois Audubon Society, work hand in hand to maintain and restore these habitats, benefiting both the birds and biodiversity at large.



Photo by Jessica Weinberg McClosky

For those keen on experiencing the beauty of the northern harrier during the winter months, several nature preserves in Illinois serve as excellent vantage points. Locations such as Prairie Ridge State Natural Area near Newton IL, The Nature Conservancy's Nachusa Grasslands near Rockford IL, and the Illinois Audubon Society's Chillicothe Bottoms Wildlife Sanctuary on the Illinois River provide the perfect backdrop for a day of birdwatching, along with a chance to immerse oneself in the peaceful ambience of prairies and wetlands. If you are lucky, you may even see them floating over set-aside grounds (CRP fields) in our area!

The northern harrier's winter presence in the Illinois prairies offers a delightful spectacle for nature enthusiasts. As the seasons shift, these magnificent birds remind us of the resilience of wildlife amidst the cold. Whether you're an experienced birder or a casual observer, taking the time to watch the northern harrier can be a rewarding and inspiring experience, deepening your appreciation for the great outdoors. So, bundle up, grab your binoculars, and venture out to witness the captivating dance of the northern harrier in the prairies and grasslands of Illinois.



2025 Calander of Events

January 1 11:00 – 2:00 ...New Year's Day Walk with a soup and chili lunch to follow.

XXXXXXX

April 5 10:00 a.m. ...Woodland Wildflower Walk with refreshments afterward.

April 12 7:00 a.m. ...Spring Bird Walk led by IAS' Matt Hayes - coffee & donuts to follow.

April 12 9:30 – 11:00 ...Community Workday. Bring gloves and a rake for mulching.

May 31 10:00 a.m. ...Spring Wildflower Seed Collecting.

June 14 7:00 a.m. ...Summer Bird Walk with coffee and donuts afterward.

July 12 ...Children's Program in partnership with U of I Extension.

July 19 9:00 a.m. ...Prairie Wildflower Walk with refreshments afterward.

August 9 ...Children's program in partnership with U of I Extension.

October TBD ...Owl Prowl, wiener roast at 4:00. Owl activities with TreeHouse at 5:00

November TBD ...Open House and Potluck. Presenter TBD

More programs may be added later.

When attending events, please dress appropriately. Trails are open from dawn until dusk every day.

Donations are always welcome.

**Hickory Hills Chapter Board of
Directors and Officers**

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Photo credits in this issue go to Don Krefft, Ray Luebbert, Nancy Redman, Ken Schaal.



Trail Map is available here.



If you are enjoying this newsletter, you are either an Illinois Audubon Society member (dues reminder are sent directly from the IAS) or you are a “Friend of Bremer”, in which case the annual dues of \$10.00 are due in January and can be mailed to: Hickory Hills Chapter PO Box 395, Hillsboro IL 62049



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