Salt Creek Greenway - Gateway to Discovery

Natural areas, historic sites, cultural attractions, land and water recreational trails, shopping centers, theatre and gourmet dining beckon visitors to one of the richest and most scenic and diverse open space corridors in Illinois.

Located within the densely populated suburbs of western Cook and eastern DuPage counties, the Salt Creek Greenway trail is designated a priority Greenway in the Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways Plan and extends through 9 communities with a combined population exceeding 300,000 residents and includes:

- 15 forest preserves in two counties
- 8 local parks and recreational facilities in 5 communities
- 5 National Historic Register sites and other historic attractions
- 3 dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves
- The Brookfield Zoo
- The historic Fullersburg area
- Graue Mill and Dam
- Mayslake/Peabody Estate
- Shopping malls, theaters, restaurants, employment and economic centers, mass transit services, historic homes, vintage communities and spacious subdivisions

SCGA is a tax exempt (501(c)(3)) organization. All contributions are tax deductible to the full extent of the law.

SCGA is a member of Chicago Wilderness, Partners for Parks and Wildlife and the Lower DesPlaines Ecosystem Partnership.

ABOUT US

Identifying, preserving and promoting the natural, historic, cultural and recreational resources of the 30 mile Salt Creek Greenway.

PRIORITY PROJECT IN THE GREENWAY FOR SCGA

Protecting and restoring the 80 acre Wolf Road Prairie and supporting the acquisition and restoration of Hickory Lane bufferlands.

In 1833, when the Illinois territory opened to European settlement, 70% of the state’s original landscape was prairie. Today, only 1/100th of 1% high quality black soil prairie remains. This includes Wolf Road Prairie recognized as the finest and largest example of black soil prairie east of the Mississippi River. Natural areas like Wolf Road Prairie are often isolated and vulnerable to invasion by non-native species. As degradation occurs, biodiversity is diminished and the site loses its ability to sustain rare native plant, insect, bird and animal populations indigenous to its origins. To reverse this decline and to ensure that the last of our priceless natural areas like Wolf Road Prairie survive, diligent ecosystem restoration is necessary, including aggressive removal of invasive species, restocking areas undergoing restoration with native seed sources and introducing seasonal prescribed burns.

THE ROLE OF SCGA AT WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

Our purpose is to partner with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC), owners of Wolf Road Prairie, and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), who oversees management and protection of the site, by recruiting volunteers, scheduling workdays, organizing special educational programs and nature tours and funding special ecosystem projects at the preserve such as the Eliminate Phragmites Campaign and the restoration of the Middle Fork Creek on 9 Hickory Lane buffer owned by IDNR.
**Phragmites Campaign at Wolf Road Prairie and Restoring the Middle Fork Creek Buffer Zone**

*Phragmites australis* (Common reed) is an invasive species which rapidly reproduces through the spread of seed and by root system cloning. It can quickly take over a high quality wetland in a matter of a few years if left unchecked.

This was the case at Wolf Road Prairie and was the reason why SCGA launched the Eliminate *Phragmites* Campaign. We retained Witness Tree Native Landscapes, Inc. to tackle this aggressive invasive species and remove it from the wetland in partnership with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), the Illinois Department of Natural Resource (IDNR) and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC).

*Phragmites* is a tall perennial grass which grows to heights of 15 feet or more and is found in or near shallow water. *Phragmites* thickets displace native wetland plants, alter hydrology and block sunlight to the aquatic community.

SCGA raised contributions to fund the first phase *Phragmites* Campaign initiating the wetland restoration in 2011. The second and third phases of the *Phragmites* Campaign are funded in part by an IDNR matching $1,800.00 Wildlife Preservation Fund grant with private matching funds raised by SCGA. 2013 marks the third phase of the *Phragmites* Campaign and concludes this year with the treatment of the remaining clumps of *Phragmites* in the wetland.

We are now beginning a new restoration project this season funded by SCGA. This involves restoring the Middle Fork Creek on 9 Hickory Lane buffer owned by IDNR. The creek drains into and connects to the Wolf Road Prairie wetland. The Middle Fork Creek has become overgrown with buckthorn and other invasive species over the past several years. This degrades the waterway and adversely impacts the hydrology and biodiversity of the creek and interferes with the recovery of the wetland. Restoring the Middle Fork Creek also plays an integral role in the recovery of Hickory Lane bufferlands.

Restoration of the wetland and buffer area will result in greater numbers of native plants repopulating the site and encouraging the return of more birds, butterflies and wildlife to the preserve.

Monitoring the Wolf Road Prairie wetland and the Middle Fork Creek will be ongoing annually in order to maintain a *Phragmites* free preserve and continue the recovery of Hickory Lane bufferlands.
THE EASTERN PRAIRIE FRINGED ORCHID AND WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

The Eastern prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*) is a rare plant species listed as both state endangered and federally threatened. This orchid has specific life history requirements that may make it more challenging to recover.

Loss of habitat, conversion of wetlands and prairies to cropland and pasture and a 70% decline in drainage due to development has resulted in the decline and loss of this exquisite native plant.

In the past, Wolf Road Prairie supported a population of the Eastern prairie fringed orchid (EPFO), but it has not been seen at the site since 1983. In 2012, Eastern prairie fringed orchid seed was introduced to WRP in an effort to re-establish the population. Seed was donated from the Nachusa Grasslands population. Seeds are microscopic, delicate and powdery. Seed was introduced by hand into the soil at Wolf Road Prairie by Cathy Pollack, Service Biologist and Nationwide Lead in the Recovery of the EPFO, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Orchid Team volunteers. Another method of introduction is to let the wind scatter the seeds as pods turn ripe.

A successful germination of introduced seeds cannot be predicted. It sometimes takes years before young plants can be identified and much longer for a plant to mature enough to blossom, be pollinated and set seed. Volunteers are trained to cross pollinate plants by hand to assist in the setting of seed. Seed pods are monitored following pollination to record the status of seed production. When seeds ripen, pods are collected and seeds are introduced into selected orchid habitat sites.

The orchid plant grows between 8 to 40 inches tall with upright leaves. Its white flowers are clustered on spiked stems. The blossoms are fragrant at night and flower for about two weeks. The Hawk moth is the known primary pollinator. Preferred orchid habitat is mesic prairie and sedge meadow with full sunlight, high quality native companion plants and specific soil composition and hydrological conditions. It is believed that the orchid also requires the presence of mycorrhizae in the soil as a food source for germinating seeds and for plants to survive and reproduce.

The re-establishment of the (EPFO) at Wolf Road Prairie is a team project involving the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and SCGA.

**Conclusion** The re-introduction of orchid seeds at Wolf Road Prairie is scheduled to be a five year project. The hope is that as time passes, orchids will once again populate, thrive and bloom at Wolf Road Prairie.
ABOUT WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

Wolf Road Prairie is owned by The Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. It is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. Wolf Road Prairie is considered the finest and largest black soil (mesic) prairie west of the Mississippi River. Countless plants, birds, animals, butterflies and insects live here, including some threatened and endangered species.

SCGA works to conduct ecological restoration at Wolf Road Prairie and provides nature tours and programs as a public service in partnership with the landowners and the Nature Preserves Commission.

WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE HAPPENINGS

Birders on spring walk led by Phyllis Mertz, The Morton Arboretum

Orchid team surveys viable locations for seed introduction

Doug Taron, Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum of Chicago, leads butterfly tour

Melina Peters, Naturalist, Little Red Schoolhouse, and Great horned owl visit Hickory Lane buffer

National Public Lands Day Chicago Wilderness volunteers gather for group shot.

Students from St. Xavier University study the History of the Great Lakes and learn how to identify prairie plants.

New Hickory Lane Buffer Acquisition

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County acquired a strategic two acre buffer property on Hickory Lane on May 29, 2013. This property contains a portion of the Middle Fork Creek which provides drainage to the Wolf Road Prairie wetland, increases wildlife habitat and protects the preserve watershed.