Restoration

Of which are rare, Two residents of Pleasant Valley’s stream and wetland native plant species, warblers. In addition, species, including hawks, wetland and an impressive prairie ecosystem. This special combination of habitats creates one of the most accessible sites in the county.

Areas are the State Endangered Blanding’s turtle and milkweed and wild black cherry can also be seen. Plants such as the northern bog violet, short green thistle and prairie Indian plantain help give this area a high structural and compositional components of the natural landscape. Historic field and forest surveys show that prior to the arrival of European-American settlers, the land and natural resources surrounding the site were used by indigenous peoples, likely for food and sustenance.

Of new growth is occuring in the valley, and the site is a testament to the resilience of nature. As the seasons change and the landscape evolves, so too do the stories that are woven into the fabric of Pleasant Valley Conservation Area.

Pleasant Valley Conservation Area has a rich and varied history. When glaciers moved through the area thousands of years ago, the natural landscape consisting of hills, valleys, and streams was formed. In the mid-1800’s Irish immigrants settled the land and established agricultural farms to support their families.

In 1952, the Chicago Congregational Union purchased the land and converted it into a summer camp and retreat center for inner-city youth and called it Pleasant Valley Farm, which later became known as Pleasant Valley Outdoor Center. For over forty years, thousands of city children ventured into the “wilds” of McHenry County to learn and play in a rural setting. Campers explored their natural environment through activities ranging from natural history studies to social sciences. They assisted with the day-to-day duties of the center by learning how to farm, taking care of farm animals, tending to the vegetable garden, and helping to prepare the meals. From the bubbling creek and wide open prairies to the oak canopied trails, the camp provided an experience that these children may otherwise never have known.

The center remained in operation for 46 years, closing in 1998. In 1994, the Conservation District purchased 109 acres of the Pleasant Valley property. Over the following 10 years, the District made several other adjacent land acquisitions and restoration efforts began in 1997. Pleasant Valley Conservation Area

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**History**

Pleasant Valley expands 2,080 acres and is a mosaic of natural areas. Within its borders exist a high-quality oak savanna, a grade 'A' stream, a never before plowed prairie, and a complete wet-prairie complex created a wetland rookery that attracts numerous visiting herons, cranes, terns, rails, and other waterfowl. The area is rich and diverse in its history.

Pleasant Valley is a product of the natural cycle of life and death in a rural setting. Campers explored their natural environment through activities ranging from natural history to farm and field work. They learned the structures and compositional components of the landscape and how to farm it. The center remained in operation for 46 years, closing in 1998. In 1994, the Conservation District purchased 109 acres of the Pleasant Valley property. Over the following 10 years, and restoration efforts began in 1997. In 1992, the area was designated as a rare and endangered site in the state.

**Preservation**

Because of its unique history, the lands that make up Pleasant Valley had been relatively protected from any prior urban development. The Conservation District's restoration efforts focused on reversing agricultural practices. Fields were re-seeded with prairie plants and fence lines were torn down. Invasive exotic species were removed through mowing, spot spraying of herbicide, and controlled prescription burns.

Restoration work also included returning the natural hydrology to a 150-acre wetland complex which involved removing a drainage ditch, farm tiles and brush were removed through mowing, spot spraying of herbicide, and controlled prescription burns. The water now flows more naturally over the ground. As a result, the shallow marsh, sedge meadow and wet-prairie complex created a wetland rookery that attracts numerous visiting herons, cranes, terns, rails, and blue-winged teals. Restoration of the functional, structural and compositional components of the landscape complements the habitat requirements for native animal species.

**Recreation**

Trails 
Visitors can trek down 4.5 miles of looped trails that wind through prairie and savanna. In the winter months visitors can try snow shoeing and cross country skiing (when there are at least 4 inches of snow) on 2.7 miles of groomed trails that are perfect for beginners or those skiers who like a longer route.

Additionally, a 3 mile solar lit trail, located on the east side of the entrance, is open until 9 p.m. daily, Nov–Mar, during Standard time to allow visitors to get out on the trails after dark.

Horse Trails 
Local horseback riders are invited to saddle up and enjoy a scenic ride along the 1.3 mile trail that transects the site near the western edge and runs north/south between Pleasant Valley Road and Hensel Road. A horse trailer parking lot is not available at this site.

Fishing 
Anglers can cast a line at the small two-acre pond and try reeling in a largemouth bass or bluegill.

**Picnic Areas and Shelters**

Enjoy a quiet picnic lunch at the amphitheater or reserve one of the two picnic shelters for a larger group gathering. The shelters include a grill and can accommodate up to 50 people.
Pleasant Valley Conservation Area

Special Features

Road Free One of the unique features of Pleasant Valley is that it is road free for 3 miles from north to south and 1.5 miles from east to west. The significance of protecting large amounts of contiguous land means protecting entire watersheds, as well as increasing the survival rate of numerous species including the state threatened Blanding’s Turtle, which travels long distances to reproduce. Pleasant Valley gives the turtles and their young offspring the perfect uplands habitat to reproduce and the ideal wetland habitat to live, without the danger of traffic-laden roads in between.

Kishwaukee River and Laughing Creek The main branch of the Kishwaukee River flows through the southwest portion of the site providing quality habitat to numerous aquatic species including the silt intolerant Iowa darter. A headwater stream, known as Laughing Creek, flows into the river from the north. According to oral history, Laughing Creek was aptly named by a young camper at Pleasant Valley Outdoor Center who compared the sound the water made as it gurgled over the stones to happy laughter.

Stone Amphitheater Visitors to Pleasant Valley are drawn to the majestic oaks that surround and shade the stone amphitheater. From beneath its leafy canopy, visitors experience a tranquil vista that overlooks a breathtaking view of wide open wetlands and prairie. This natural amphitheater is the perfect place to rest from a hike on the nearby trails, enjoy a picnic lunch, hear the calls of native wildlife or spot a red tail hawk. Surrounded by the natural beauty of nature, the amphitheater has become a popular place for couples to exchange or renew their wedding vows.

**Images:**
- Savanna
- Prairie
- Wetland
- Red-tailed Hawk
- Prairie Buttercup
- Bull Frog
- Picnic Shelter
- Laughing Creek
- Stone Amphitheater