Recreation

Marengo Ridge Conservation Area

The major glacial feature at Marengo Ridge Conservation Area is the Marengo Ridge, from which the site derives its name. Left by the retreating Wisconsin glacier, the Marengo Ridge moraine is 40 miles long, 3 miles wide, and creates one of the steepest, vertical moraines in Illinois at 1,050 feet above sea level. This rugged, fire-protected topography supported woodlands communities dominated by oak species.

When early settlers came to the area it proved difficult to farm. As a result, numerous blocks of timber were spared and still remain on the landscape. Marengo Ridge Conservation Area protects the larger remaining blocks of what was once the Big Woods of McHenry County, which at one time encompassed large portions of Seneca, Marengo, Dunham and Hartland Townships.

In 1843, Daniel Stewart was the first settler to claim 80 acres in the area. Over the years, the land was primarily used for agriculture. Forty acres of which were planted with a variety of crops such as corn, oats, potatoes and hay. By the late 1920’s, agricultural fields were taken out of production and used as pasture for livestock. In 1950, Dr. Emerson Kunde purchased the property. In 1974, Kunde sold 80 acres to the Conservation District. In 1977 the District purchased another 40-acre wooded parcel from John Kelly who had operated a private campground on the property. In 1980, the District added the Thomas Woods parcel, which then provided enough space for the District to offer its first recreational campground. Marengo Ridge Conservation Area opened to the public in 1982 and today encompasses 818 acres.
Jack-in-the-Pulpit. May apple and bloodroot blanket the woodland floor each spring. Asters, shooting stars, goldenrod wave in the breeze and 14 different species of wildflowers and the rare fish and mussel species that can be found throughout the summer. A variety of prairie grasses and invasive species, reseeding, and conducting periodic prescribed burns. Over 300 native plants and wildflowers, including wild geranium, columbine, and the rare fish and mussel species that can be found throughout the summer. A variety of prairie grasses and invasive species, reseeding, and conducting periodic prescribed burns. Over 300 native plants and wildflowers, including wild geranium, columbine, and thistles, provide fantastic elevated views of the surrounding area.

History

Marengo Ridge Conservation Area is one of McHenry County’s most popular and treasured areas. It contains over 818 acres of oak and hickory woodlands interspersed with spruce, aspen, ash and sumac groves. When former landowner Dr. Emerson Kunde bought the land in 1950, 40 acres had been heavily grazed by livestock. In an effort to reforest the area, Dr. Kunde planted 15 species of conifers with the hope that they could survive the harsh soil conditions. Although not native to the area, the trees thrived and changed the landscape once again. Over the years, Kunde planted over 10,000 pine trees on 60 acres including Norway spruce, Douglas fir, red and Scotch pine, as well as thousands of wildflowers and hardwoods. Restoration work at Marengo Ridge involves removing invasive species, reseeding, and conducting periodic prescribed burns. Over 300 native plants and wildflowers thrive here including wild geranium, columbine, and Jack-in-the-pulpit. May apple and bloodroot blanket the woodland floor each spring. Asters, shooting stars, and black-eyed Susans grow along the hiking trails throughout the summer. A variety of prairie grasses and invasive species, reseeding, and conducting periodic prescribed burns. Over 300 native plants and wildflowers, including wild geranium, columbine, and thistles, provide fantastic elevated views of the surrounding area.

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Hiking Hikers can explore 5 miles of trails as they wander through majestic oak woodlands and savanna. Interpretive signs are placed along the trails to educate hikers about the unique history and geology of the area. The 1.3 mile Kelly Hertel Nature Trail meanders through woodlands and prairie. For those wanting a longer trek, the 1.1 mile Long Hiking Loop flows into the Kelly Hertel Nature Trail for a combined 2.6 mile hike. Take the .5 mile Campground Loop trail or travel the 1.25 mile South Hiking Loop trail that travels through restored woodlands and prairie.

Cross Country Skiing Glide through blanketed woodlands and stride across frozen prairie on cross country skis. When there is four or more inches of snow, skiers can enjoy over four miles of groomed trails. There is a 2.2 mile trail designated for beginners, as well as a 2.3 mile trail for intermediate skiers.

Bird watching Bird watching is a popular activity at Marengo Ridge. Look for species like the white-breasted nuthatch, northern flicker, red-eyed vireo, scarlet tanager, American goldfinch, indigo bunting, blue jay, downy woodpecker, great-crested flycatcher and cedar waxwing.

Picnics Marengo Ridge is also a popular area for picnics and group activities. Two picnic shelters or the picnic area can be reserved online or by calling the District’s Administrative Office. Picnic shelter #2 provides fantastic elevated views of the surrounding area. A fire ring, restrooms and drinking water are also available near the main parking lot.
Marengo Ridge Conservation Area

Special Features

Oak Communities
Four basic oak communities once occurred across the McHenry County landscape: barrens, savannas, woodlands and forests. Marengo Ridge contains both remnant oak woodlands and forests.

Oak Woodlands
Oak woodlands were once more prevalent in the Northern Illinois region, but today healthy woodlands, like the one in Marengo Ridge, are rare. Healthy oak woodlands generally support a variety of oak species including bur, white, black, red and scarlet oaks. Woodlands are characteristically more shaded than savannas. They exist on steeper topography where the trees typically grow higher in density per acre. Oak woodlands are rich habitat that shelter and provide food for all manner of wildlife.

Oak Forest
Oak forest remnants are also extremely rare in McHenry County. Those that remain are clustered in rugged terrain that is fire protected and difficult to use for other purposes. The tree growth is typically straighter as trees reach upward competing for sunlight. Oak forests have a rich ground layer of wildflowers and shade tolerant grasses and sedges.

Threats to Oak Ecosystems
The remaining oak ecosystems in McHenry County are under intense pressure from habitat fragmentation, development, direct cutting, invasive species, reproductive failure and lack of management. These oak communities will not survive without intervention. The Conservation District is protecting some of the last remaining oak communities across the county, but is encouraging municipalities and private landowners to assist in preserving these majestic grandfathers of the Midwest.

Glacial Moraines
The Marengo Moraine was created about 24,000 years ago by the Wisconsin glacier. The ridge is made up of rocks, gravel, sand and finer sediments that were carried within or pushed ahead of the ice sheet as it advanced and left behind as it melted. Where the ice melted and advanced at an equal rate, the debris piled up at the glacier’s leading edge. The result is a deposit that is up to 280 feet deep, several miles wide and 40 miles long. At its highest point, the ridge stands 1,050 above sea level. In Marengo Ridge Conservation Area, the area around Shelter #2 offers excellent vantage points for surveying the geological history of the area.