

# Winding Creek CONSERVATION AREA



Chorus Frog  
photo by Bob Williams

**W**inding Creek Conservation Area is a 359-acre site located near Hebron that protects a high quality stretch of Nippersink Creek and an ancient oak grove. Located off Johnson Road north of O'Brien Road, this is the latest in a series of sites the Conservation District is opening to the residents where they can connect with nature, sneak away for a reprieve from the day's activities, and enjoy some outdoor recreation in close proximity to home. Winding Creek offers picnicking, fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing and cross-country possibilities.

A 1.7 mile looped nature trails leads visitors under the shaded canopy of oaks and hickory trees to a small fishing pond. West of the pond hikers will pass a stand of pine trees that were planted in 1977 by former owners. (Although non-native, pine trees and pine plantations were common throughout McHenry County. Unable to reproduce naturally in our area, these pines are not self-sustaining and will eventually disappear.)

Northwest of the pines lies a meandering section of Nippersink Creek, not quite visible from the trail. The bermed pond was created when previous owners built the earthen dam which holds back the water flowing from the creek. It is fed by a steady flow of natural spring waters of relatively high quality with an outlet structure that flows west into another wetland area. Although man-made, this 1 acre pond

was retained to provide visitors with a recreational fishing amenity. A fishing pier was added for easy access to the water. Catch and release is encouraged.

After looping around the pond, the trail heads southeast through restored prairie where hikers can witness native wildflowers taking hold, while butterflies, dragonflies and birds also visit the newly restored habitat. The loop returns back to the main parking lot where you can unpack your picnic lunch and enjoy some refreshments at the picnic shelter positioned near the edge of the oak woodland. An early morning parking lot near the entrance off Johnson Road was included for those who want to hike before 8 a.m. when the dew is fresh and the birds are singing their morning melodies.

Ecologically, a key focal point of Winding Creek Conservation Area is the oak grove remnants. Over the past 12 months restoration was conducted on 15 acres of oak woodland and 2.3 acres were replanted with native landscaping. In the months to come restoration work will include re-creating some of the woodlands to its original size, reseeding former agriculture fields back to native landscape, stream bank stabilization, and enhancing the overall wildlife habitat south of Nippersink Creek. The Winding Creek Conservation Area serves as a buffer from negative impacts for the high-quality portions of Nippersink creek. The continued preservation of this creek



Indigo Bunting photo by Bob Williams



Common Yellowthroat in Joe-Pye Weed  
photo by Bob Williams

A CLOSER LOOK

**Site Features:**

- 1.7 miles of hiking trails, 2 wooden bridges along the trail
- Fishing pond with pier
- Picnic shelter with two grills
- Bike rack, drinking fountain, restrooms
- ADA path to shelter and restrooms
- Early morning parking lot.
- Automatic (solar) entrance gate
- Main parking: 9 spaces, 2 bus stalls
- Bioretention area in parking lot



corridor is critical to maintaining the health and habitats of plant life and wildlife both on-site and downstream. Moreover preservation efforts aid in the protection of the greater watershed and connected water bodies such as the Fox River.

Future improvements on the site may include adding additional nature trails and secondary loops, and potentially an elevated boardwalk system along the northern bank of Nippersink Creek. The Conservation District is also working with the County to allow group campsites along the woodland edge.

## History

In the early nineteenth century, Bailey's Grove was 1,000 acres of nearly continuous woodland. As European American settlers built farms and homesteads in northern Illinois, groves such as this provided fuel, lumber and fence posts. By 1990, when acquisition of the site began, Baileys' Grove had been reduced to approximately 150 acres of scattered timbered fragments interspersed with pastures and farm fields.

Like most properties in McHenry County, a majority of this site was used for agricultural production. Previous owners who resided here in 1970s & '80s fondly referred to their place as Will-O-Wisp Farm. They documented that corn and soybeans grew on the property; and prior to their arrival cows pastured in the woods where no new trees survived their foraging.

By 1973, when grazing ceased, young oaks reseeded themselves. In 1977 the former residents planted red and white 6" pine seedlings (now seen west of the pond). Other land tales from this era tell of a wild plum tree (perfect for making jelly), an old red apple tree and a pear tree grove that grew near the homestead, and raspberries, blackberries, mulberries and strawberries grew wild in the woods. Fox, bobcat, beaver, muskrat, deer chipmunks, skunks, squirrels and raccoon roamed the woods while duck, frogs, fish and turtles made use of the pond. During much of the tenure of Will-o-Wisp Farm the woods were included in the Illinois Conservation Department's Acres for Wildlife program.

## Winding Creek Grand Opening

*Saturday, June 4, 10 a.m.–1 p.m.*  
*8415 Johnson Rd., Hebron*

Join us we cut the ribbon and welcome the public to tour and play at the District's newest Conservation Site.

- Stroll on a guided woodland hike to hear about the restoration efforts and learn about the wildlife and fauna that exist on the site.
- Venture on the family-friendly Hidden Homes & Animal Hideouts hike.
- Or go at your own pace on a self-guided scavenger hunt on the .7 mile nature trail through the woods and around the pond.
- Test your luck at casting a line in the pond (*IL Fishing licenses required for adults; children under 16 fish for free.*)
- Bring your picnic lunch and eat at the shelter situated at the edge of the woodland.



Eyed-Brown  
photo by Bob Williams