

Prairie Crossing at Twenty

December 2015: Interesting Tidbits

By Nathan Aaberg & Erin Cummisford, Prairie Crossing residents & Liberty Prairie Foundation staff members

This is the final 20th anniversary newsletter insert - we hope you enjoyed learning more about Prairie Crossing! These documents are available on the updated Prairie Crossing website, www.prairiecrossing.com.

Public Art in Prairie Crossing

A variety of public art installations celebrate elements of the natural world that makes Prairie Crossing so distinctive.

When Prairie Crossing was just beginning, the developers asked Terry Evans, a prairie photographer newly arrived in Chicago from Kansas, to take the photographs of the Liberty Prairie Reserve that hang in the Byron Colby Barn. Terry is now famous for her large-scale aerial views of the Chicago region that brought crowds to Millennium Park in 2005.

These photos are beautifully reproduced in *Revealing Chicago*, published by Harry N. Abrams, including aerials of the Prairie Crossing Farm and Village Green. Terry's photographs gave Prairie Crossing a strong sense of its place in the historic oak savannas, prairies and farmland of the Liberty Prairie Reserve.



The brightly painted tractor seats along the trails celebrate the area's agricultural roots.

In 2006, three sculptures by the artist Mark White were added to celebrate the prairie wind.

Located north of the boat dock, each one is designed to move differently in the wind.

Mark White is fascinated by the mechanics of the wind and perception of its movement. His sculptures reflect not only art but science. Their movement is delicately balanced, the result of detailed calculations and experimentation. The sculptures are on study poles above reach to protect them; please don't interfere with them, just enjoy watching them dance in the breeze.

The fountain in Station Square features landscape art by Sven Schunemann, celebrating the place of water in our native landscape. The centerpiece of the fountain is a great glacial boulder found when Lake Aldo Leopold was excavated.

Sounds of falling water carry beautifully around Station Square. The fountain originally featured a replica of the magic pebble found in William Steig's children's book, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*.

Snake Hibernaculum

You can't have a complete prairie ecosystem without snakes which eat other creatures and are then eaten themselves. Prairie Crossing is fortunate to have harmless garter snakes.

Our modern world is a dangerous place for snakes, however, as roads and even trails can be deathtraps. The more subtle challenge snakes have is surviving winters, and it's fortunate that the garter snakes of Prairie Crossing have at least one spot, a "hibernaculum," where they can get below the frost line in the winter months and then emerge in the spring.

Though the following story was published over 10 years ago, we thought residents would appreciate this "slice of life", and perhaps glance more closely at our local wildlife for hints of Theo's bloodline!

A Duck's Tale

Copyright 2004 Miriam Frank and Erica Levinsky

In May 1999, 11 year old Prairie Crossing resident Erica Levinsky was given a cold duck egg laid away from a nest by a domestic duck that had mated with a wild mallard. After 24 days of incubation, we were greeted by a tiny, wet, tired little duckling, completely mallard in appearance.

Erica named the baby Theodore and within hours the little fluff ball was following her everywhere, peeping madly. The duckling had imprinted on Erica and was convinced that she was mom. This imprinting was adorable, but for the next several months, Theo was literally always under foot, and very anxious when Erica was not around. To avoid long nights of frantic peeping, we allowed the duckling to sleep on Erica's bed in a small travel cage.

The speed of Theo's development was incredible. Able to fit in the palm of Erica's hand when hatched, it doubled in size in a week. Swimming in a dish when it was a few days old, Theo later had a kiddie pool for the backyard, eventually graduating to the bathtub.

Theo had free run of our house, and with all the growing, there was a tremendous amount of eating and pooping. This meant that as long as Theo lived in the house, we had to follow around with paper towels, constantly cleaning up the mess.

Nonetheless, there was never any question of banning the duck from the house – Theo was part of the family. Our two dogs also had to learn to adjust to Theo's presence. Theo developed a taste for dry dog food and for drinking from the dog's bowl. The three of them lined up for dog treats, all at attention, each waiting a turn.

Theo took a first, very short flight, venturing further over the next few days, but unsure about

staying out alone. Theo became famous that summer for following boaters and swimmers in Lake Aldo Leopold, and once or twice hopped on a boat for a ride home. The duck successfully transitioned to largely independent living as the summer progressed, but would sometimes come to our house for a visit, pecking on the front door to be let in. On one occasion, the duck flew up the stairs and stood waiting for a bath in our tub.

As the fall wore on, and other local ducks migrated, we and many neighbors were concerned about Theo's welfare. One very cold night in early December, a neighbor who lived by the lake called – a very hungry and thirsty Theo had followed him home. It was great, though messy, having Theo home for the winter. The duck slipped seamlessly back into our family life, joining in our millennial New Year's Eve party.

In February 2000, Theodore started laying eggs in her crate, revealing her true identity as a girl. When the weather broke, we let her out and she made a bee-line for the water, found a mate, and set up a nest in the neighborhood. Although she lost her first eggs to predators that year, in subsequent seasons Theo managed to raise at least one family of ducklings, many of which migrated away with her and returned in spring.

This spring (2004), Theodore had not shown up by the end of the first week in April, several weeks later than usual, and we feared the worst. However, she was just waiting to make a grand entrance.

On the first night of the Jewish holiday of Passover, during our family's Sedar, we followed the custom of opening the door for the prophet Elijah, and to symbolically welcome the hungry to the table. This time, when Erica opened the door, in walked Theodore. She snacked on dog food, drank from the dogs' water bowl, and spent the next two days snoozing on a rug by our garage door, as if she had never left.

Download the complete collection of the 20th anniversary newsletter inserts in the "Life at Prairie Crossing" section of the updated Prairie Crossing website, www.prairiecrossing.com.