

# Prairie Crossing at Twenty

## September 2015: Wildlife

*By Nathan Aaberg, Prairie Crossing resident & Liberty Prairie Foundation staff member*

*The design of the typical suburban community often concentrates on the comfort of its homes, the efficiency of its roads, and the profit of the development enterprise. In the process, however, life is made difficult or impossible for wildlife. Prairie Crossing is different. As a conservation community, Prairie Crossing from the beginning assumed that there are people who want to share the world with nature and are better off when they do. Its landscape architects, planners, and builders consciously planned how to make life comfortable for people and hospitable for wildlife as well. Today, Prairie Crossing stands as an example of what the larger world must do if nature is to have a chance. It is an example of people being selfless enough to renew the ecological value and vibrancy of a particular place's land and water. It is also an example of people wrestling with the creative challenge of how to use the land for human purposes and needs even as accommodations are made for non-human life. And, just as important, it is an example of people having fidelity to a place by stewarding the ecosystems of that place year after year. This is a brief overview of how Prairie Crossing was made wildlife-friendly, the wildlife that accepted the invitation, and what you can do to keep nature alive and well here in your home community.*

### **Putting Conservation Into Community**

The most fundamental decision the developers and planners of Prairie Crossing made in the design stage was setting aside large areas of undeveloped land that would be managed for habitat. Science tells us that one large piece of unfragmented habitat is far more valuable for wildlife than the equal amount of open space split up among many smaller plots. If you look at an aerial of Prairie Crossing, you'll also see that the planners made sure that wildlife could find corridors of connecting green houses between groupings of homes.

The open space areas of Prairie Crossing were then restored to natural habitat with native vegetation. Native vegetation is critical to prairies, wetlands, lake, and ponds because it is the foundation of the food chain that runs from insects up to birds, mammals, and other creatures. If you want to have prairies, then you need natural processes, like fire, which has been provided by volunteers and contractors.

There are several other aspects of Prairie Crossing that support a rich diversity of natural life. One is its location inside the Liberty Prairie Reserve, a 5,800-acre area where public and private partners have preserved 3,400 acres of

natural areas and farmland. We are part of a larger, habitat-rich landscape.

Many Prairie Crossing residents also use native plants on their own properties, thereby expanding the total amount of habitat in Prairie Crossing. In fact, at 63, Prairie Crossing has more home landscapes certified by Conserve Lake County's Conservation@Home program than any other single subdivision in all of Lake County.

The organic farm fields on the north and west sides of Prairie Crossing are of ecological value, too. The diversified farm landscape is a place where bees and other pollinators can find blooming flowers throughout the year and where birds and other creatures can find food and shelter (unlike a conventional corn-and-soybeans field). Did you know that a teaspoon of healthy soil can contain over one billion microorganisms? That's a lot of wild life.

### **Built It and They Did Come**

There are numbers that will tell you that the many considerations for wildlife in Prairie Crossing have made a difference. There are, for examples, nine species of toads and frogs in Prairie Crossing. This despite the fact that these amphibians are declining around the greater

Chicago area. There are also nine species of fish, including five threatened and endangered species that thrive here but are having a hard time surviving elsewhere because they need high quality natural conditions. Over 120 species of birds have been seen here, including a variety of raptors and migrants.



*Emma Coonan alertly took this photo of bald eagles visiting Lake Aldo Leopold.*

Anecdotes also capture the richness of wildlife here. A **least weasel**, a rare species in Lake County, found itself trapped in a window well early this year and was able to return to happy hunting with the help of friendly folks. A bicyclist late one evening almost ran into a **doe and her fawn** on the trail between Prairie Trail and Hedgerow. A **mink** was seen moving quickly along greenhouses on the farm as it continued its rodent control mission.

On a fall evening, a group of **nighthawks** swooped and turned over Hedgerow as they took advantage of a gathering of migrating green darner dragonflies to grab food on the wing.

**White egrets** and **great blue herons** can be seen wading in the shallow water on the edge of the lake. A walker came upon a **crayfish** that had been driven from its hole by heavy rains and that was waving its pincers as menacingly as a two-inch creature can. Residents shared on the list-serve how a group of **coyotes** chased down **rabbits** on the snowy landscape. Gardeners, even some who are sympathetic to animals, cheered. Residents in Station Village enjoy the sounds of **great horned owls** calling to each other with romance in mind from home roofs. The audience for an outdoor play was delighted when **bats** flew over while eating mosquitos.

## What You Can Do

The story of wildlife conservation in Prairie Crossing is still a work in progress so your help is welcome and needed. Natural areas, like homes and cars, require ongoing maintenance. For the terrestrial systems, this means regular prescribed burns. For all of the systems, it also means keeping invasive plants (and even some natives) under control so that the diversity of the wild areas is not lost. Here's what you can do:

**1. Volunteer for the Environmental Stewardship Committee (ESC):** The volunteers of the ESC carry out important land stewardship work in the common areas of Prairie Crossing through regular workdays. They are a warm, welcoming bunch and can always use more help. Think of it as helping nature, keeping fit, and showing community spirit all in one. You can contact the ESC at [environment@pchoa.com](mailto:environment@pchoa.com).

**2. Planting native vegetation on your own property:** Planting native vegetation, even just native shrubs and trees or in defined beds, is a way to support a variety of wildlife and make Prairie Crossing, as a whole, a richer place in natural biodiversity. A great resource is the Environmental Handbook that was developed by the ESC and that the ESC can provide to you when you contact them. Another good resource is the Conservation@Home program of the Conserve Lake County. Find out more at [www.conservelakecounty.org](http://www.conservelakecounty.org).



*Without native plants like milkweed, beautiful creatures like the monarch butterfly can't survive. Native habitat in Prairie Crossing's extensive common areas and home landscapes is vital for a variety of creatures.*