

New IAS Wildlife Sanctuaries: Hopewell Hill Prairies & Fern Ridge

Story and Photos by Tom Lerczak

WHEN TRAVELING along the Illinois River Valley, it's understandable for a visitor's attention to be drawn to large, scenic highlights such as Starved Rock State Park or the Emiquon-Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge complex. In doing so, smaller sites can easily be missed, especially those that do not appear on a highway map. The Illinois Audubon Society recently added two such natural areas to its wildlife sanctuary system: Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve and Fern Ridge Nature Preserve.

These sites were donated to the Society by Dr. Maury Brucker and Ms. Emiko Yang of Peoria (bottom right photo), and both are dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves. Hopewell Hill Prairies and Fern Ridge are located in Marshall County within the Village of Hopewell, about 4.5 miles north of Chillicothe along Illinois Route 29 (see the "Road Trip" sidebar for more details).

Hopewell Hill Prairies consists of 16 acres in four separate tracts on bluffs that rise 150 feet above the adjacent river floodplain. Native prairie openings are the outstanding features of this preserve. These are glacial drift hill prairies which occur on moraines left by Wisconsin Ice Age glaciers more than 10,000 years ago. As the climate warmed, prairies eventually covered much of central Illinois; those occurring on steep, southwestern-facing bluffs are termed "hill prairies." Although most of Illinois' original prairies have long been lost to agriculture, some hill prairies have survived, and those at Hopewell Hill Prairies—though small in size—are some of the best. The rest of this preserve is timbered within a rough landscape, providing a diversity of habitats for rare plant species, including the state-threatened sedge *Carex communis*. In addition,



Dr. Maury Brucker and Ms. Emiko Yang have donated \$15,000 to support future stewardship of Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve and Fern Ridge Nature Preserve. Illinois Audubon Society is dedicated to honoring their legacy of care and management of these properties into the future.



Fern Ridge includes mesic upland forest.

birding at Hopewell Hill Prairies is excellent for deep forest species, such as the pileated woodpecker, and edge species, such as the eastern towhee. The preserve is ideally located for birders to experience the migratory seasons because at the edge of several steep ravines, an observer searching for warblers can literally look directly into canopies of trees rooted far below. So far, 124 bird species have been identified at this preserve.

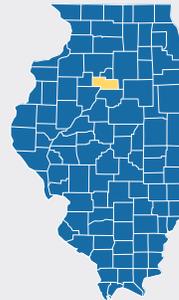
At 3.25 acres, Fern Ridge is completely forested. Its main features are a vigorous and extensive population of *Carex communis* and, of course, an outstanding array of ferns on northward-facing slopes. The forested ravine system at Fern Ridge is similar to what is found at Hopewell Hill Prairies, which is only about a third of a mile to the south as the crow flies. What a visitor sees there—ravines giving rise to several habitat types that directly translate into abundant natural diversity—is even more impressive given the preserve’s small size.

Preventing invasive plants from becoming established in these high-quality nature preserves has been a great challenge, as surrounding areas support high populations of several widely known problematic species such as autumn olive and bush honeysuckle. Preventing encroachment of the hill prairies by trees and shrubs from surrounding forests also has been a challenge. But fortunately, for more than two decades, Dr. Brucker and Ms. Yang have ensured that proper management has been consistently applied. This involved not only physical removal of the undesirable vegetation, sometimes with chainsaws, but conducting controlled fires. Without such management, the hill prairies would eventually change to forest or be overrun with invasive plants, while the forested communities would become shadier and less dominated by native oaks.

Because neither of these preserves supports a trail system, visitors should view either site only from the ridgetops not far from the roads, where most of the highlighted features can be seen. Extensive hiking is not allowed to avoid trampling of vegetation, soil erosion and damage to sensitive

plant communities. Also, as a precaution against spreading invasive plants into the preserves, visitors should be sure that their clothing and shoes are free of seeds before entering.

Although the sites are small in size, memories from a short visit there will form a lasting impression much out of proportion to the actual size of the preserves, and these areas may become a regular stop along any tour along the Illinois River Valley. ■



**Hopewell Hill Prairies & Fern Ridge
Nature Preserves
Village of Hopewell, Illinois 61565**

Peoria Audubon Society (local stewards)
peoriaaudubon.org or Audubon@peoriaaudubon.org

Illinois Nature Preserves Commission
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Hopewell Hill Prairies and Fern Ridge Nature Preserves can be accessed via Hopewell Drive in the Village of Hopewell, Marshall County, just west of Illinois Route 29, about 19 miles northeast of Peoria. Parking is along the roadsides. Neither trails nor facilities are available. The nearest convenience stores and restaurants are at Lacon, on the east side of the Illinois River, about 4 miles northeast of Hopewell.

Hopewell Hill Prairies, Running Elk Units: From Route 29, turn west on Hopewell Drive and continue for 0.7 mile to Boyland Drive. Turn left onto Boyland Drive. At the T-intersection, turn left onto Sioux Drive. Follow Sioux Drive for 0.1 mile to Running Elk Court. Turn right on Running Elk Court and continue to the cul-de-sac for the main preserve entrance.

Hopewell Hill Prairies, Sioux Unit: At the T-intersection of Running Elk Court and Sioux Drive, follow Sioux Drive east less than 0.1 mile. The preserve unit is on the left.

Hopewell Hill Prairies, Illini Unit: At the T-intersection of Boyland Drive and Sioux Drive, proceed west 0.1 mile to Illini Drive (another T-intersection). Turn left on Illini Drive and continue for 0.1 mile. The preserve unit is on the left at a small pullout just after roadside railings.

Fern Ridge: From Route 29, turn west on Hopewell Drive and continue for 1.3 miles to the cul-de-sac. The preserve is on the left.



BIO

Thomas V. Lerczak retired from the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission in June 2018 after 22 years as a natural areas preservation specialist. He has maintained a blog called *The River Landing* since 2008 at theriverlanding.typepad.com, and is the author of *Side Channels: A Collection of Nature Writing and Memoir*, published in 2011