MAY 2020

THE NODDING ONION

Newsletter of the Northeast Chapter of the Illinois Native Plant Society

Photo: *Uvularia grandiflora* by Mark Kluge

WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE:

From the President

I recently took part in an online presentation with several other verified plant nerds—live from my backyard! While I recognized many of the faces and names in the audience, the blessing in this cursed time is that many more events than before have been recorded for later watching by those unable to attend live or in person. Check out "Plants of the Chicago Wilderness Region: Stories from Home and Field" below.

While our 2020 Annual Gathering has been canceled, the Illinois Native Plant Society is still on track to host some small, safely distanced summer events, as well as online events. Keep an eye on our website, illinoisplants.org, for the latest details. Best wishes to you all!

—cassi saari

Photo: Mark Kluge

PLANTS OF THE CHICAGO WILDERNESS: STORIES FROM HOME AND FIELD

Featuring several presentations by local botanists and ecological restoration practitioners, hosted by Robb Telfer. Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H64pptFK3wk

Milkweeds of the Indian Boundary Prairies
Travis Kuntzelman, The Nature Conservancy

Can parasitic plants help grassland birds?
Daniel Suarez, Audubon Great Lakes

Native landscaping and backyard iNatting
cassi saari, Illinois Native Plant Society

The way of the warrior sedges
Kevin Scheiwiller, Citizens for Conservation

Habitat potential of post-industrial landscapes
Lauren Umek, Chicago Park District

Illustration: Maureen Clare Murphy

Violets: Ant's dream or taxonomist's nightmare?

By Maureen Clare Murphy

Small but formidable, frustrating the manicured lawn gardener and the native plant enthusiast alike: it's the genus *Viola*, the violets. More than two dozen violet species have been recorded in our area and the violet was named the state flower of Illinois. But which one? The school children tasked with deciding the state flower in 1907 did not specify (they also chose "the oak" as the state tree). The law has since been updated to reflect that the "native violet" is the designated state flower of Illinois (illinois.gov still simply lists "the violet" as our designated flower).

More than two dozen violet species have been recorded in our area and the violet was named the state flower of Illinois. But which one?

The internet generally assumes that those school children and the updated law intended for the common blue violet (*Viola sororia*) to be our state flower. That is mainly because it grows everywhere, even very degraded habitat like lawns, which our state boasts lots of.

Most plants are not concerned with making things easy for taxonomists and the violet family is no exception. A glabrous (non-hairy) variant of *Viola sororia* has been given the name *Viola pratincola*, and "tends to be the common weedy violet of old field and lawns," according to Wilhelm and Rericha's *Flora of the Chicago Region*.

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The flora also lists the (unfortunately named) Confederate violet (*Viola priceana*) as a distinct species, but acknowledges that "this violet may not be specifically distinct from the polymorphic complex we are calling *Viola sororia*." However, with its white corollas streaked with blue, the flora authors have "recogniz[ed] it here to allow the student to discern at least the white-flowered forms" of the highly variable and frequently encountered *Viola sororia*.

Meanwhile, the yellow flowers of *Viola pubescens* are commonly found in our area's mesic woodlands, forests, and savannas. This species has also vexed taxonomists. Wilhelm and Rericha note that "Some authors have thrown up their hands trying to sustain this species and its variety *scabriuscula* as distinct, which attitude affords our sincerest empathy."

More specialized is *Viola pedata*, which mainly occurs in prairies and savannas with sandy or gravelly soils. Its common name—bird's foot violet—refers to its narrowly lobed leaf shape. Its distinct leaf and blue-purple corollas lend to its easy identification. This species too has a strongly bicolored variant.

Another native violet, the uncommon prairie violet (*Viola pedatifida*) has a similar leaf to *Viola pedata,* but features a slightly smaller flower with a tuft of white hair at its throat. Its habitats include black soil prairie and savannas and, as illinoiswildflowers.info notes, *Viola pedatifida* "can be considered an indicator plant of high-quality prairie remnants."

Photo: *Viola pubescens*, Aaron Carlson CC BY-NC 4.0

All our violets are attractive to ants, which carry their eliaosome-enriched seeds to their nest. The ants eat the elaiosome but not the dispersed seeds, which are mechanically ejected from their capsules once they ripen.

Violets are found in pretty much every habitat in our area, blanketing the ground with green in spring before much else has emerged.

If school children were asked to pick a state flower today (maybe with the help of iNaturalist), perhaps they would still choose the comfortingly familiar and resilient violet, which hangs on despite all the pressures of a century of rapid development and habitat degradation.

Karen Johnson Celebrates Life's Diversity in her Art

By Maureen Clare Murphy

The curled up fingers of a dried compass plant leaf, moody blue-gray clouds hanging low over yellowed grasses, a formation of sandhill cranes migrating across a partly cloudy sky. These are some of the observations made in natural science illustrator Karen Johnson's sketchbook, and which she shares on her Instagram (@karensnatureart) and at karensnatureart.com.

Photos and illustrations by Karen Johnson

"That's the feeling that I try to bring about in my artwork, that awe that I see."

Living in Naperville, with degrees in both entomology and biological illustration, Karen's art practice is grounded in her strong science background. "I've loved art ever since I was little and I've also loved insects ever since I was little," she told the *Nodding Onion.* "I was in the middle of my entomology degree when I discovered that Iowa State had a biological illustration program and I was like, oh, that sounds really cool."

Art has proven a way for Karen to connect other people to the beauty of the natural world that might otherwise be overlooked. "The fact that I can show what I find fascinating about insects and plants in my art is what I really enjoy doing," Karen said. There is a reverential quality to her work that one might not necessarily find in a textbook scientific illustration. "There's so much variety and diversity [in the world] and the more I study it, the more amazed I am," she explained. "That's the feeling that I try to bring about in my artwork, that awe that I see."

Karen's plans to observe spring emerging at the Schulenberg Prairie at the Morton Arboretum, where she teaches art classes, were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo: A page from Karen's sketchbook with artwork and reflections from Schulenberg Prairie

"It's like you're a discoverer—even if other people have made these discoveries, you haven't."

With the arboretum closed, and other natural areas getting more crowded, she's finding things to study in her yard and neighborhood. "I guess I took it for granted that I was able to go draw in these places, and I didn't realize how much they actually affect me," she said. "When I go out there, it clears my head, it brings me joy, it brings me peace. If I'm worried about something I can focus on something else for a while, and just be rejuvenated."

Karen's sketching practice, and returning to the same places throughout the year, allows her to slow down and observe more closely. "You start seeing all the connections there are and how things interrelate [...] and how we as people have an effect for good or bad on a habitat."

Though she is also a photographer, drawing in the field opens her up to experiences she wouldn't have if she simply snapped a picture and walked away. "I'll have birds come in and land just a few feet from me, or a hummingbird will come check me out," she said. While drawing, she once watched a blue gentian open up as the sun came out. "I had no idea that it would open up like that because the white ones I had drawn always stayed closed. "So it's like you're a discoverer—even if other people have made these discoveries, you haven't."

Photo: Insects and plants are rendered in lifelike detail in Karen's sketchbook along with her notes from the field

"A nature journal is for observing and for getting down things on paper that you want to remember."

The prairie has been a primary focus of Karen's work for the past few years after she connected with Cindy Crosby, a naturalist, author, and steward of the Schulenberg Prairie, where Karen now volunteers.
"I don't think I could ever learn everything there is to learn—there are hundreds of plants and probably thousands of insects in the prairie, even in the tiny Schulenberg."

Asked about advice for starting a nature journaling practice, Karen said: "A nature journal is for observing and for getting down things on paper that you want to remember, so it's a memory keeper. Or if you're a scientist, it's where you put your observations."

As for how and where to get started, "You can even start one in your own yard—what flowers are blooming in my yard? What insects do I see? What animals do I see? You can just scribble, you can just draw what you see." And there is plenty to see, even in the highly urbanized Chicagoland area. "People always think, well if it's beautiful, it has to be a mountain or an ocean," Karen said.

"I guess I want to get across that where we live, there is beauty here. Even in the prairie, even in the middle of winter, the prairie can be beautiful. It's a different kind of beauty and we have to open our minds and our hearts to it."

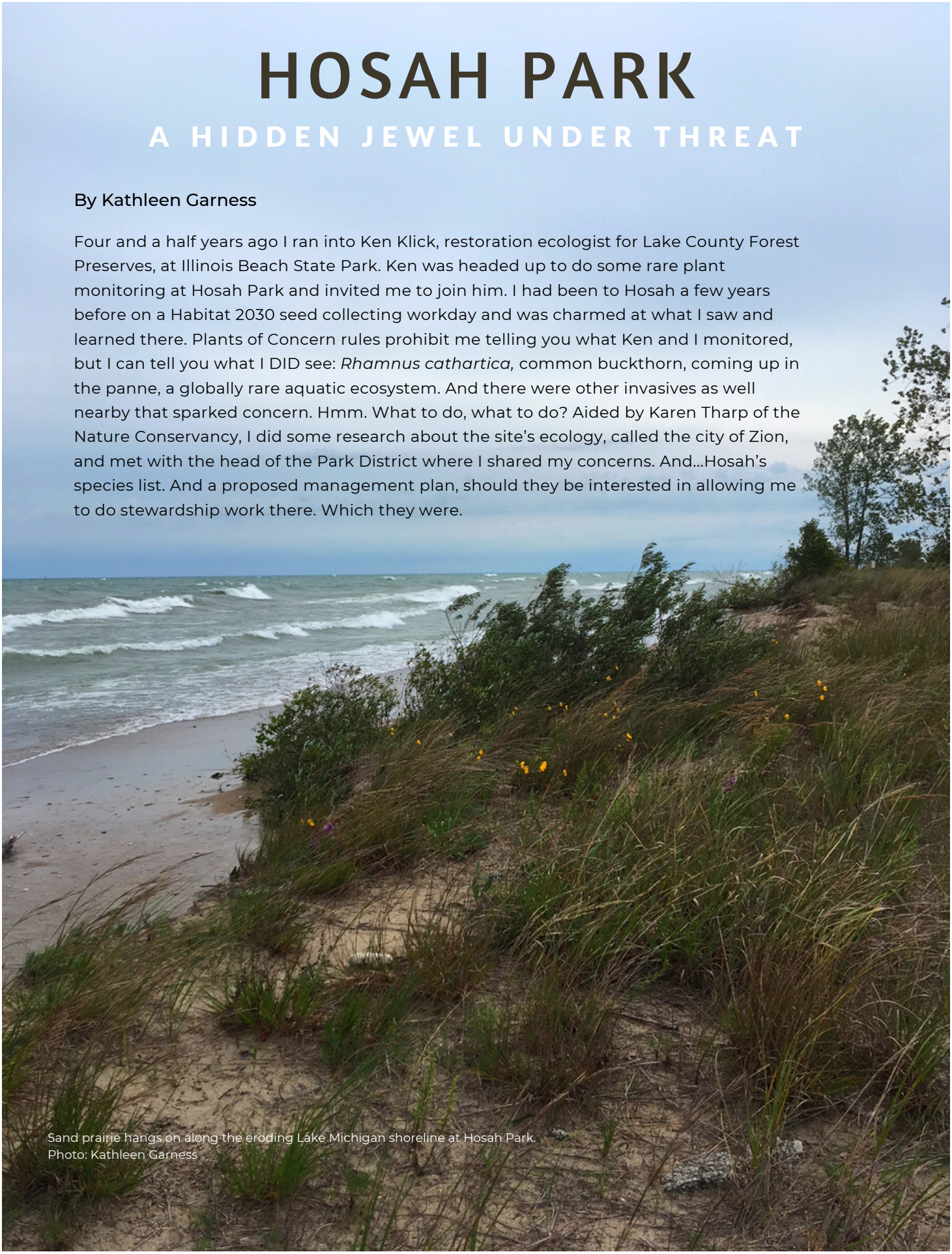
Photo: Karen uses watercolors to document her observations of the natural world

HOSAH PARK

A HIDDEN JEWEL UNDER THREAT

By Kathleen Garness

Four and a half years ago I ran into Ken Klick, restoration ecologist for Lake County Forest Preserves, at Illinois Beach State Park. Ken was headed up to do some rare plant monitoring at Hosah Park and invited me to join him. I had been to Hosah a few years before on a Habitat 2030 seed collecting workday and was charmed at what I saw and learned there. Plants of Concern rules prohibit me telling you what Ken and I monitored, but I can tell you what I DID see: *Rhamnus cathartica,* common buckthorn, coming up in the panne, a globally rare aquatic ecosystem. And there were other invasives as well nearby that sparked concern. Hmm. What to do, what to do? Aided by Karen Tharp of the Nature Conservancy, I did some research about the site's ecology, called the city of Zion, and met with the head of the Park District where I shared my concerns. And...Hosah's species list. And a proposed management plan, should they be interested in allowing me to do stewardship work there. Which they were.



Sand prairie hangs on along the eroding Lake Michigan shoreline at Hosah Park.
Photo: Kathleen Garness


Stiff sandwort (*Sabulina michauxii*)


Fringed puccoon (*Lithospermum incisum*)


Dwarf birch (*Betula pumila*)
All photos: Mark Kluge

Hosah Park's 23 lakefront acres are home to 240 documented species of plants, of which 206 are native. The total mean C is 5.5, with a native mean C of 6.5. There are 20 listed species, and many more very conservative ones, as would be expected in a Grade A/B remnant lakefront sand prairie.

The park is east of a railroad spur line to the now-decommissioned Zion Nuclear Power Plant. As you walk from the small parking area to the prairie, you can see some remnants of the "corduroy" dune and swale ridges that formed from wind and sand currents as glacial Lake Chicago receded. Black oak woodland with a sprinkling of birch dominates the higher ground. A marshy area nearby was home to some nesting sora rails last year.

The path forks before the spur, with the path on the left going up to Illinois Beach State Park's north unit, and the right fork taking you to Hosah. Native columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), sensitive fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*) and skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) hint at some of the interesting things you will see on your walk. As you cross the railroad tracks, you see the wet, calcareous panne ecosystem on your left, and sand prairie to your right. (This is where Dr. Gerould Wilhelm noted the rare western golden aster (*Heterotheca villosa*), a species only locally seen at Hosah and in one area of the Kankakee Sands.) Along the edges of the panne you can find the conservative dwarf birch (*Betula pumila*) in some abundance, mixed in with blue-fruited dogwood (*Cornus obliqua*) and red sticks (*Cornus sericea*). A close cousin, lakeside redsticks (*Cornus baileyi*), was discovered along the shoreline by botanist Scott Namestnik in 2017 when he came up for a foray. Unfortunately, that population has been since destroyed by erosion.

The walkway that leads up to the pavilion reveals some uncommon finds along the edges: early-blooming sand cress (*Arabidopsis lyrata*), host to the rare Olympia Marble butterfly, seen at Hosah a few years ago by birder Adam Sell. Two, or possibly even three species of blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium* spp.) can be seen mid-spring, along with yellow star grass (*Hypoxis hirsuta*). A close look at the leaves of the latter reveals just how hairy it is!

Another of my favorites is stiff sandwort (*Sabulina michauxii*), which holds its five-petaled white flowers high above a bristly green mound of stiff, pointed leaves. Prickly pear (*Opuntia cespitosa*) and Carolina rose (*Rosa carolina*) discourage us from walking off trail, and there's plenty of western poison ivy (*Toxicodendron rydbergii*) to be mindful of on those ridges.

On the edges of the swales, tubular yellow flowers hide inside deep purple, fern-like sprouts of freshly emerging wood betony (*Pedicularis canadensis*). In late spring the sand prairie is glorious with hairy, hoary, and even a few lemon-yellow fringed puccoon (*Lithospermum croceum*, *L. canescens*, and *L. incisum*, respectively). In the summer, delicate flowering spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*) holds court with an incredibly long bloom season, while yellow sand coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) and western sunflower (*Helianthus occidentalis*) provide visual counterpoint to the rich purples of aptly named cylindrical blazing star (*Liatris cylindracea*), rough blazing star (*L. aspera*), and marsh blazing star (*L. spicata*). If you're lucky, you might even see the cobalt violet flowers of silky aster (*Symphyotrichum sericeum*).

All this against a backdrop of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), and the delicate plumes of switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*). If you look closely, you might also be treated to a sniff of the tiny low calamint (*Clinopodium arkansanum*), which, like its cousin, mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), is very fragrant. You might also see the tiny whitlow grass (*Draba reptans*) or bushy pinweed (*Lechea stricta*) pointed out to me in 2015 by botanist Will Overbeck. Monarch butterflies are often seen at Hosah—but of course—there are five species of milkweeds!

Graminoids of interest include several rushes (mostly in the panne and swales), fifteen *Carex* and several non-*Carex* sedges, and grasses such as prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), porcupine grass (*Hesperostipa spartea*), Kalm's brome (*Bromus kalmii)*, June grass (*Koeleria macrantha*), and purple sand grass (*Triplasis purpurea*). In 2013 botanist Linda Curtis discovered long-stalked panic grass (*Dichanthelium perlongum*) at Hosah. I'm not sure it's been seen since.

Above: Volunteers gather after a monitoring and brush-cutting workday at Hosah Park. Photo: Kathleen Garness

Hosah is a hidden jewel that is under threat. The winter of 2019/2020 saw the worst erosion yet. Since 2015 it has lost at least 200 feet of beach, and one section of boardwalk had to be removed in 2019 because the lake was washing up underneath it. The entire foredune and most of the dune behind the foredune have been lost to erosion. Last July we saw the toppling of a tall twin cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) that had been a sentinel on the dunes for many years. (Read Henry Chandler Cowles' account of dunesland ecosystems to learn more about these interrelationships). A unique panne system behind the second dune was filled in by sand last year, with many very rare species lost. Isolated rescues of some prickly pear and other uncommon plants were done in 2018 and 2019, with the plants moved a bit more inland within Hosah.

However, the speed and scale of erosion due to lake level rise and increased precipitation the past two years has been beyond any possible volunteer or agency resources. So we mourn the loss of these plants while feeling grateful for knowing them for a time, realizing that of all ecosystems, the duneslands are among the most vulnerable to change. Their beauty will seduce and restore you. Come visit sometime soon. Who knows what the future will bring?

A unique panne system was filled in by sand last year, with many very rare species lost.

Photo: Low calamint (*Clinopodium arkansanum*) by Mark Kluge

Calendar

Please note that events may be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Check our website for the most up-to-date info.

Northeast Chapter Board Meetings

Tuesday, June 9 & Tuesday, August 11
7:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Our organizing team is meeting every other month in 2020 (meetings are virtual for the time being). If you are interested in attending these planning meetings, receiving meeting notes, or getting involved in other ways please contact us at: northeast.inps@gmail.com.

Spring on the Prairie: a virtual hike through James Woodworth Prairie

Saturday, May 30
10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

See a high quality tallgrass prairie in the gorgeous full bloom of spring! JWP is a 5-acre remnant of Grade A black soil prairie and swale, spared from development in the 1950s by prairie advocates and currently owned by the University of Illinois at Chicago. In mid-May, the prairie is carpeted with wood betony, violet wood sorrel, yellow stargrass, hoary puccoon, prairie phlox, bastard toadflax, Seneca snakeroot, alumroot, and many others!

We'll be live from Facebook, join us: https://www.facebook.com/NortheastIllinoisPlants/

Boloria Fen & Sedge Meadow Nature Preserve

Saturday, July 18
9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.

Boloria Fen and Sedge Meadow Nature Preserve is significant for its relict natural communities. A high quality graminoid fen and sedge meadow are the most outstanding features of the site. Important fen community plants have been documented and are increasing in number and diversity. While the mesic oak savanna and dry-mesic oak woodland were degraded by livestock grazing and elimination of fire, these natural communities contain numerous old and very large oak and hickory trees and are the focus of restoration efforts. Boloria Fen and Sedge Meadow was added to the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory in October 2004 as a Category I Natural Area supporting a high quality fen wetland.

This hike is open to the first 20 people who RSVP, with preference to current INPS members: https://bit.ly/boloria2020

Illustration by Kathleen Garness

Contribute to *The Nodding Onion*

We're looking for submissions! Do you have an article, artwork, photos, or other content you'd like to share with the *Nodding Onion*?

Contact Anna Braum, Newsletter Editor, at:
inpsnenews@gmail.com

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The Illinois Native Plant Society is a volunteer-led, member-based organization with dues comprising the majority of our revenue. Please renew and encourage friends to join. Join or renew on our website: https://ill-inps.org/member

As a member of the Illinois Native Plant Society, you contribute to our mission of promoting the appreciation, conservation, and study of the native flora and natural communities of Illinois.

As a member, you receive:

Erigenia: our peer-reviewed scientific journal
The Harbinger: the statewide newsletter
The Nodding Onion: our chapter newsletter

Notification for and priority RSVP for events, including the statewide Annual Gathering, guided field trips, lectures, workshops, and other events.

Photos: Anna Braum

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