

Attachment 8: Recent Media Updates

SCIENCE & NATURE (/SCIENCE-NATURE)

MLK Day of Service: Take a Hike Through the Forest Preserves and Pick Up Litter

Patty Wetli (/stories-by-author/Patty Wetli) | January 15, 2021 7:00 am



Show appreciation for nature on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. (photoforyou / Pixabay)

Due to COVID-19, much of the programming for Martin Luther King Jr. Day is taking place online this year, but the Cook County Forest Preserves has announced an opportunity for in-person service, no computer screen required.

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On Monday, people are encouraged to stop by any one of the preserves' six nature centers, or the Dan Ryan Woods visitor center, grab some trash bags and gloves, and head out on a self-led litter cleanup hike, any time between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. (10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Dan Ryan Woods).

Clearing trash, officials said, not only makes the preserves a nicer place to visit, but also creates better habitat for native plants and wildlife.

“Throughout the pandemic, the forest preserves have provided the public with a place to safely get outside for nature (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/12/03/green-responders-both-overwhelmed-inspired-peoples-newfound-love-nature>), fresh air and exercise. This is an opportunity to get outside and give back,” Forest Preserves General Superintendent Arnold Randall said in a statement.

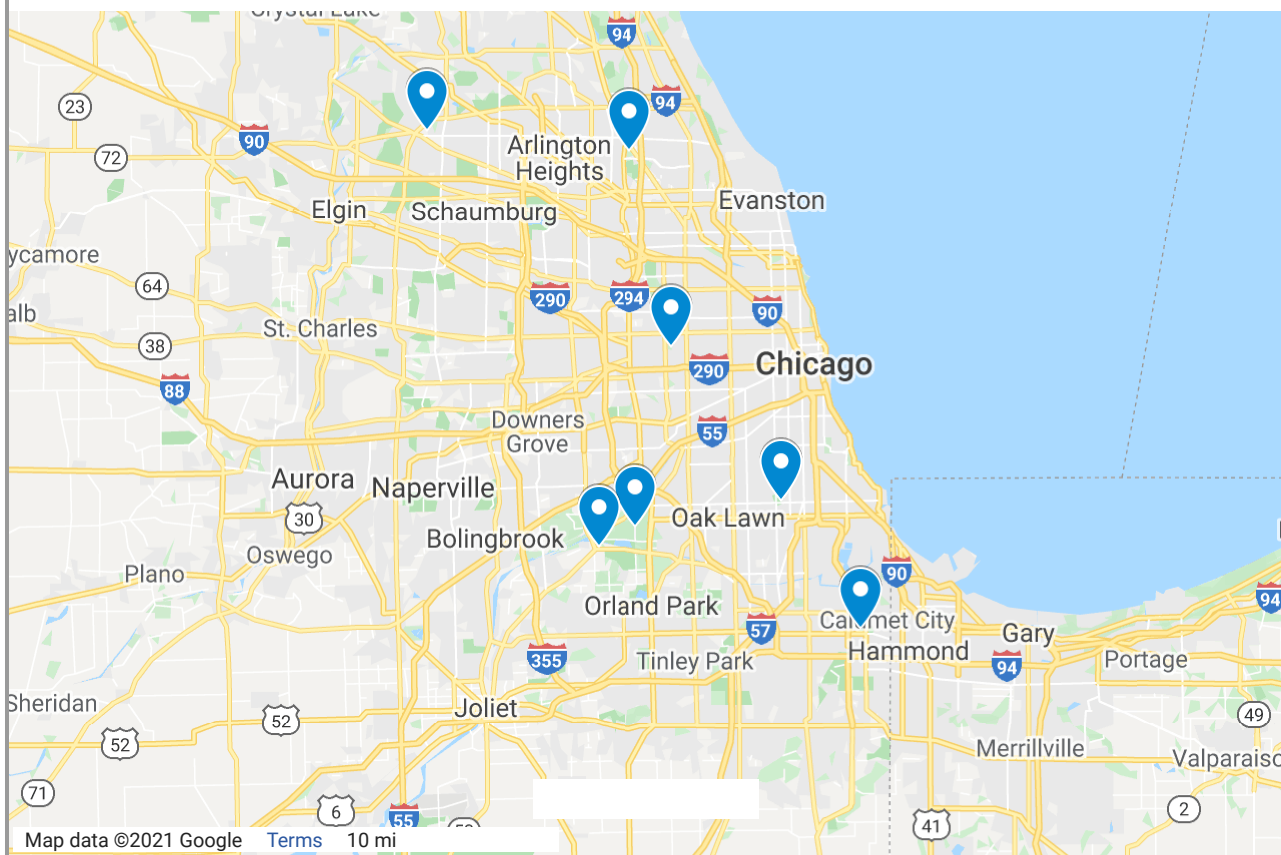
Activity packets will also be available at the centers, while supplies last, for young children, with information about King’s life and legacy.

“The lessons Dr. King left us about the necessity of equity and the power of community are a transcendent gift for every American. To celebrate his legacy on Jan. 18, and every day, let’s remember those lessons and remind ourselves that we too can choose to make a difference,” said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

Below, a map of nature center locations. (Registration is required for Dan Ryan Woods. Call 312-415-2970 or send an email to Jessica.Becker@cookcountyil.gov (mailto:Jessica.Becker@cookcountyil.gov?subject=MLK%20Cleanup%20at%20Dan%20Ryan%20Woods))

Cook County Forest Preserve Nature Centers ☆

This map was created by a user. [Learn how to create your own.](#)



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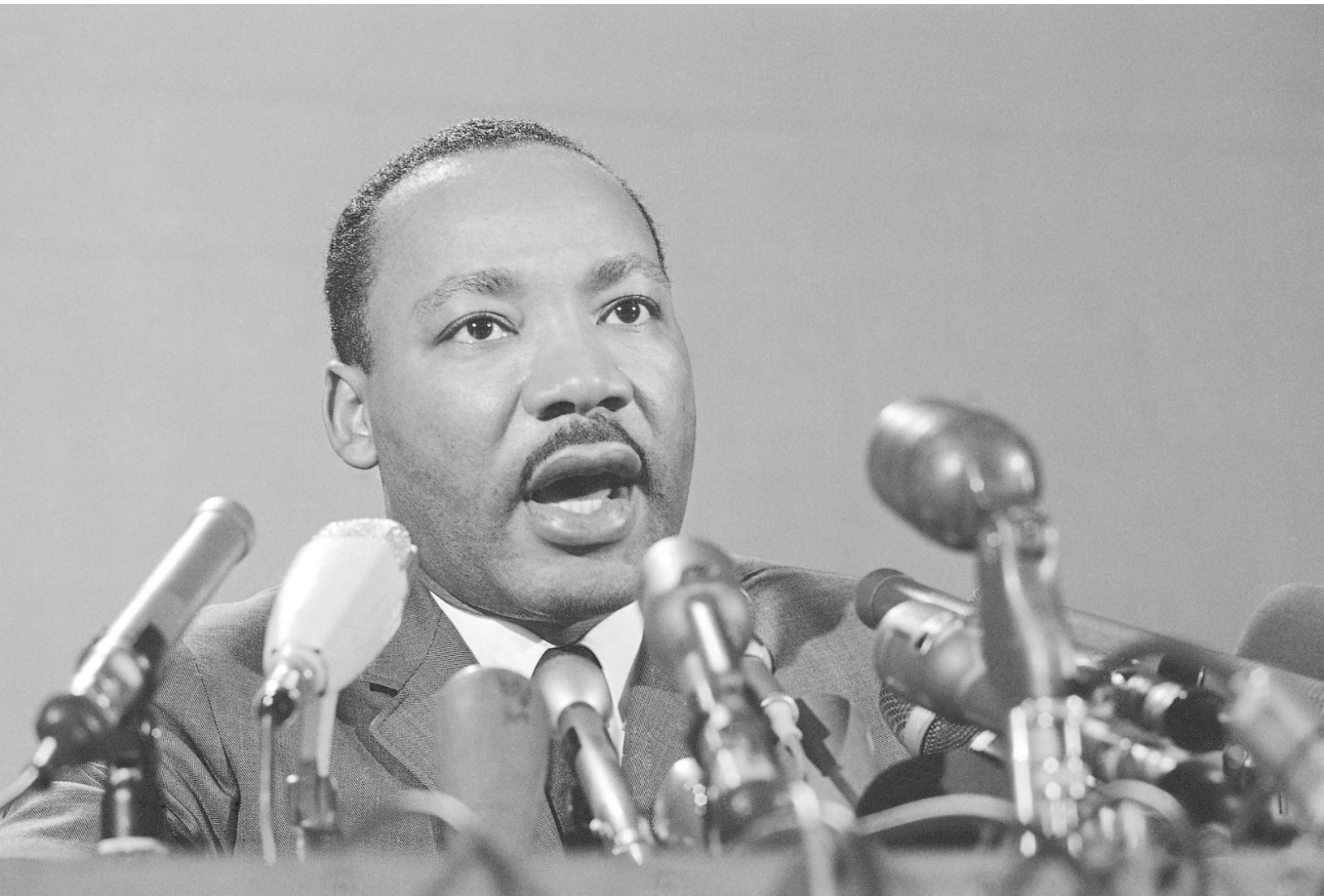
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Virtual Events And Service Work Honor MLK Day in Chicago This Year

By [Linda Lutton](#), [Mark LeBien](#)

Jan. 17, 11:05 a.m. CT



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks at a press conference in Chicago in March 1967. He discussed planned civil rights



On Monday, a wide range of groups and institutions in Chicago will honor America's most revered civil rights leader by holding opportunities to serve the community, from picking up litter to protesting for community-controlled policing.

Other events will promote study and reflection on King's fight for racial and economic justice — including his “Campaign to End Slums” in Chicago — and his particular form of nonviolence.

Here are some of the local activities that are planned. Many are virtual due to the pandemic. Most are free, but some require registration.

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Chicago History Museum

In January 1966, King [brought his civil rights movement to Chicago](#). The museum will hold a [virtual event](#) from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. commemorating King's work in the Windy City. “MLK Day: King in Chicago” will include a virtual tour of places he visited, storytelling and lectures, including a talk about King's activism in the North Lawndale neighborhood and how it has inspired contemporary activism there. Get in the mood and mindset with a [Spotify playlist](#) the museum compiled of songs and speeches in support of and inspired by the civil rights movement.

Rainbow PUSH Coalition



Art Institute of Chicago

The museum seeks to highlight “the role that art and artists play in social and political transformation.” They are offering virtual live and recorded programs all week, including a performance by young poets from the [Rebirth Poetry Ensemble and the performance duo In the Spirit](#) at 5 p.m. Monday. There are also creative projects for families, including at-home art activities based on the quilted portraits of artist Bisa Butler. The museum’s beautiful Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2021 [web page](#) includes lots of links to talks, art and performances, plus “resources for taking action for equity and justice, even from your own home.”

Cook County Forest Preserves

The forest preserves system is inviting volunteers to [hike and pick up litter](#) at the preserve of their choice. Trash bags and gloves will be provided at the preserves’ six nature centers and at the Dan Ryan Woods Visitor Center, or you can bring your own and head out to clean up any of the preserves. The Forest Preserves has compiled a list of “[litter hotspots](#)” that need attention.

My Block, My Hood, My City

The Chicago nonprofit group plans to distribute supplies of coronavirus personal protective equipment (PPE) to more than 2,000 local senior citizens. They’re seeking [volunteers to register](#). Supplies will be provided to volunteers through a drive-thru system, and they’ll make deliveries to needy seniors. They’ll meet at 10 a.m. at the MLK Bridge, 9901 S. Martin Luther King Dr, for a short dedication. The group recently [affixed](#) a giant King quote to the bridge: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.”

Rise Up! Protest

Black Lives Matter Chicago, the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political



Breaking News: Des Plaines House Fire Claims 4 Young Children, 1 Adult

Palatine Approves Engineering Contract For Bike Path Connection At Smith & Dundee

By Igor Studenkov on January 22, 2021

Palatine Village Council took one step toward making the bicycle path connection between Smith Street and the existing bike path in the Deer Grove Forest Preserve north of Dundee Road a reality.

During its Jan. 11 meeting, the council voted unanimously to approve the contract for Phase II engineering services for the project. Village Manager Reid Ottesen said that he had reservations about doing this project amid the COVID-19 induced budget crunch, but he ultimately recommended proceeding with it because Cook County will cover the majority of the costs.

The project has been a major priority for Palatine's bicycling community, since it would make what is now one of the most dangerous crossings at Smith and Dundee safer.

The project is part of the Palatine Bike Plan, which aims to fill in gaps in the existing bike network. The project includes adding clearly labeled crossings at the Smith/Dundee intersection. In addition to painting crossing markers, the project adds push-button activated crossing signals at both crossings.

The second part of the project will add a paved bike path between the northwest corner of the intersection and the existing Deer Grove Forest Preserve bike path further north.

Rosemont-based Christopher Burke Engineering, which already did the preliminary engineering work for the project, won the contract to provide the more detailed Phase II engineering services. Cook County is covering \$115,000 of the \$210,000 total project costs. Palatine and the Palatine Park District have agreed to split the remaining \$95,000.

While Cook County and the Forest Preserves of Cook County are, legally speaking, separate taxing bodies, county commissioners double as the forest preserve commissioners, creating a de facto jurisdictional overlap.

Ottesen said that construction is expected to start sometime during the 2021 construction season.

Councilman Kolin Kozlowski (District 3) wondered who would maintain the new bike path. Ottesen responded that, based on his past experiences, he was "99% certain" that the village would be responsible for it.

Councilman Brad Helms (District 6), praised the project.⁸

“I think a lot of people have been anticipating it,” he said. “There’s no good way to get [across] Dundee [right now].”

Wayne Mikes, president of Palatine Bike Club and owner of Mikes Bike Shop, said that he was glad to see the project coming to fruition. He touted the benefits of the crosswalks and the traffic signal.

“This new connection to the end of Smith Street is going to be a great connection,” Mikes said.

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Illinois' 596 Nature Preserves Need More Than Protection From Development To Thrive

Acre by acre, a new conservation group is restoring the Prairie State's most precious natural resource — the prairie.

By Jerome McDonnell

Jan. 6, 6 a.m. CT Updated 11:08 a.m. CT

► LISTEN 6:30



In the 1960s, the creation of the Illinois Nature Preserves made the state a pioneer in conservation. There was a sense of urgency after the state had plowed or developed most of its prairie. Now, a volunteer-run organization called Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves has sprouted up in an attempt to help preserve the state's natural heritage. Jerome McDonnell / WBEZ

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Environment & Public Health

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A year ago if you looked past the gate of Short Cemetery in Coal City, Ill., near Morris, you would have seen a predictable landscape: a tranquil collection of gravestones surrounded by trees. But, to the trained ecologist, the native prairie plant life was crying out for help, choked by invasive species and overgrowth that had crept in since the cemetery was originally declared protected land in 1988.

So last March, a crew of committed volunteers conducted the first burn there in years. Burns are a key part of prairie management. Most invasives don't survive

them, and deep-rooted prairie plants thrive on them. At Short Cemetery, there were almost not enough prairie plants left to burn. And although the grounds will need several years of care for the prairie to really come back, it was already showing signs of life when I visited in June, with an abundance of spring flowers and sunlight brightening the space.



A dramatic-looking prairie burn at Short Cemetery last March. Many nature preserves like this one in Coal City, Ill., near Morris, are privately owned. Courtesy of Eriko Kojima

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The dramatic makeover of Short Cemetery is a microcosm of a statewide preservation effort that kicked off in early 2020. Called [Friends of Illinois Nature](#)

[Preserves](#), this volunteer organization brings together expert ecologists and botanists with people who just like the idea of preserving — or “stewarding” as they like to say — the Prairie State’s most valuable natural heritage: the prairie.

Stephen Packard was a pioneer of the stewardship movement in the late 1970s, which was so successful that the Chicago area now teems with volunteer stewardship groups to cut back invasives, reseed with natives and assist with prescribed burns. Now 77, Packard is backing Friends, which aims to take the same idea to the [state’s 596 officially designated Nature Preserves](#).

“Nature Preserves are like churches. They need a congregation,” said Packard, who serves as the group’s treasurer and sees himself in support of a new generation. Packard believes that the work of stewarding these precious natural resources has enduring appeal. “It’s complicated and demanding and rewarding and fulfilling enough to the people who do it, that you could have [a stewardship group] everywhere, like a Little League or the local audubon society,” he said.



By June, the prairie at Short Cemetery had responded beautifully to the spring burn. But these pioneer cemeteries are extremely delicate. They should be visited with as low an impact as possible. Any substantial foot traffic would harm them. Jerome McDonnell / WBEZ

Protected forever

In 1963, the creation of the Illinois Nature Preserves made the state a pioneer in conservation. You’d probably recognize the triangular signs — with its charming

cardinal and white oak leaf — but many people I’ve talked to don’t know what Illinois Nature Preserves are. In the language of the [landmark legislation](#), they are land that “retains or has recovered to a substantial degree its original natural or primeval character.” There was a sense of urgency about [preserving these biodiversity hotspots in the early ‘60s](#) because Illinois had plowed up or developed more than 99% of its prairie.

The innovative part of the Nature Preserves idea is its high level of protection: Illinois was the first state to protect land in perpetuity, preventing these tracts from being nibbled away or developed. Another pioneering aspect of the law decreed that even land owned privately or by municipalities can be drawn into the system. For example, Glenbrook North, my old high school, [has an acre and a half prairie remnant](#) designated an Illinois Nature Preserve. Some of the most valuable preserves are the 29 [pioneer cemeteries](#) on undisturbed prairie. But most of the preserves are where you’d expect them to be: Half of the acreage is in state parks, and [25 are in Cook County Forest Preserves](#). To date, all of the state’s Nature Preserves remain intact.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) oversees the Illinois Nature Preserves. Assistant Director John Rogner said through the mid-1900s, the conservation movement practiced “fortress conservation.” But in the early ‘60s, the full force of invasive species hadn’t yet struck. Invasives like buckthorn, honeysuckle and reed canary grass would soon sneak into the “fortress” built to keep Illinois’ landscape safe. “There was a realization, my Lord, now we have to manage all of this or it’s going to decline and we’re going to lose them anyway,” Rogner said. “So that’s where we are right now.”



Emma Leavens is a volunteer leader with Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves, which brings together expert ecologists and botanists with people who believe in biodiversity. Jerome McDonnell / WBEZ

Not rocket science

At a Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves event in March, an enthusiastic band of volunteers gathered at Goose Lake Prairie near Morris, where there are a couple acres of high-quality prairie in need of attention. An invasive berry plant with thorns — aptly anointed the “purple pokey” by the volunteers — was just one of the species wreaking havoc in the area. After the invasives were cut, Kim Roman from the DNR led a burn of the area. Matt Evans, president of Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves, noted that the group’s effort was “one of those cases where we tipped the scales in just one day.”

But aside from that small, high-quality plot, there are 1,500 more acres of nature preserve that still need the attention regular stewardship would afford them. The Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves has since multiplied these types of workdays, matching restoration experts with local teams of volunteers. The idea is that these trained locals will eventually lead the groups themselves.

Packard noted: “Starting a stewardship group is sort of like learning to drive a car or change your baby. It’s not rocket science, but you don’t do it right without anybody helping you learn how to do it.”¹⁵

While some of the small, privately-owned nature preserves like Short Cemetery stand to benefit dramatically from the Friends attention, so do some big, famous parks.

This past December, I checked in on a Friends workday at Langham Island, a 20-acre island and part of Kankakee River State Park. The site is revered among nature lovers as something of a botanical Galapagos, hosting a number of rare plants and the only known population of a beautiful wildflower now called the “Kankakee Mallow.”



The wildflower known as the “Kankakee Mallow.” Jerome McDonnell / WBEZ

But in recent years, the island has been overrun by invasive honeysuckle. A Friends group led by Emma Leavens has been knocking that down. And in an attempt to create more mallow, last year they took logs out of a bonfire to create a “[rolling bonfire](#)” to wake up more mallow seeds. It worked. I saw the tall mallow stalks. Mallow seeds are now waiting for spring where the honeysuckle used to be.

The effort has [drawn attention in the Kankakee area](#), attracting new volunteers and contributions. Among the local workers that day, Steve Bohan and Karen Horn live right next door to the state park in the town of Alton. They’ve had a great time volunteering. Bohan said they’re complete amateurs but committed to the cause. “We believe in biodiversity,” he said. “We believe in restoration.” Horn added that she found it amazing to see the island “open up” after the brush was taken out. She’s looking forward to seeing more native plants in their natural habitat.

Bohan's and Horn's positive experiences is part of the goal, said Leavens, a Friends organizer. "What we're trying to foster is a culture and practice of participation," Leavens said. "And that will require a lot of people — but mostly it will require people who care."



Eriko Kojima is a veteran steward. She applied the finishing touch to some invasives in Goose Lake Prairie with a roller and a bucket of plant poison. Jerome McDonnell / WBEZ

The machinery of Illinois' native ecosystem

Because of the patchwork ownership of the Nature Preserves, management of the system was always going to be a collaborative affair — which is why the Friends intervention may have come at the perfect moment. In the past 15 years, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the biggest player and the state's governing body for the preserves, has seen its budget slashed. The DNR's Rogner estimates that half the staff has been cut in that time. Today, the division that oversees that nearly 600 Illinois Nature Preserves amounts to just a dozen staffers. But the DNR is trying to bring new energy, nonetheless. Recently, the Nature Preserves received an interim executive director, and the DNR said it plans to fill the role, a position that has been vacant for four years, soon.

George Covington, the chair of the Nature Preserves Commission, which helps select new Nature Preserves and advises on their care, is acutely aware of the need for more visibility. "There's a whole lot of people raising money for

conservation in Illinois, but none are raising money specifically for the Natures Preserves,” he said. The Friends group hopes to change that.

John Rogner thinks the Nature Preserves are in a good position to rebound.

“That’s the legacy of the Nature Preserve system that was designed to keep all the machinery of our native ecosystem still intact, so we could rebuild it at some point,” he said. “And that’s what it’s there for now.” Moreover, Rogner noted, the biodiversity contained in the preserves is “all that’s left of the real Illinois, our real native landscape that was here. Those are the bits and pieces — the nuts and bolts of the machinery, so to speak.”

It just needs people who care.

SCIENCE & NATURE (/SCIENCE-NATURE)

The Pileated Woodpecker is 2021's Bird of the Year

Here's where to see this raucous beauty near Chicago

Patty Wetli (/stories-by-author/Patty Wetli) | January 6, 2021 6:51 am



A male pileated woodpecker, distinguished from a female by the red stripe on his cheek. (Veronica Andrews / Pixabay)

With its flaming red crest and a call that's been described as "slightly maniacal," the pileated woodpecker has often been misidentified as the inspiration for Woody (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101665227>), the best known, albeit fictional, woodpecker of them all.

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Now the pileated has its own claim to fame: It's been named the bird of the year for 2021 by the American Birding Association (<https://www.aba.org/2021-bird-of-the-year-pileated-woodpecker-dryocopus-pileatus/>).

Jeff Gordon, ABA president, made the announcement New Year's Eve, officially ending the reign of the cedar waxwing, which, Gordon allowed, deserved a better year to represent than 2020. (The waxwing was honored, however, with a poster designed by Chicago artist Tony Fitzpatrick (<https://www.aba.org/store/2020-bird-of-the-year-cedar-waxwing-poster-2/>).)

The choice of the pileated, one of the biggest forest birds of North America, is particularly suited for our times, Gordon said, as an emblem both of nature's wildness and its adaptability — a bird of the woods that's increasingly coming into our backyards.

The pileated woodpecker is a year-round resident of Illinois, more commonly found in the heavily forested southern parts of the state than the north, according to the Illinois Natural History Survey (<https://inhs-uiuc.blogspot.com/2010/03/by-susan-post-old-adage-that-lumberman.html>).

The bird requires large, standing dead trees or downed wood, and drills holes that are more like craters (https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Pileated_Woodpecker/media-browser/60408681) to get at its primary source of food — carpenter ants.

With the loss of old-growth forests, Illinois' pileated population began to dwindle in the late 1800s, but rebounded in the 1920s as second-growth timber matured, according to the Natural History Survey.

A new twist to the pileated tale has brought the woodpecker closer to Chicago than ever in recent memory. The decimation of the region's ash trees by the emerald ash borer has created a wealth of habitat for the pileated, as reported by the Chicago Tribune in 2016 (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/naperville-sun/ct-nvs-woodpecker-emerald-ash-borer-trees-st-0324-20160324-story.html>).

For birding newcomers hoping to catch a glimpse of the bird of the year, here's what to look for: Pileated woodpeckers are about the size of a crow and can be ID'd not only by the aforementioned bright red crest but by the bold black-and-white stripes on their face and neck. Males of the species have a red stripe on the cheek. In flight, the bird reveals extensive white underwings, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

They prefer bottomland forest habitat but have been known to visit partially wooded suburbs.

Pileated woodpeckers have been seen at several Cook County Forest Preserves (<https://fpdcc.com/know-7-native-woodpeckers-in-cook-county/>): McClaughry Springs, Thatcher Woods, Sand Ridge Nature Center, Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center, Sagawau Environmental Learning Center, Miller Meadows, Salt Creek, Paul Douglas, Busse Woods and Spring Creek.

The birds also frequent Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve, Hickory Creek Preserve and Messenger Woods in Will County (<http://https://www.reconnectwithnature.org/news-events/big-features/woodpeckers-a-winter-treat-for-birders>). In DuPage County, head to Blackwell, Waterfall Glen, Wood Ridge and West DuPage Woods forest preserves (<https://www.dupageforest.org/plants-wildlife/wildlife/birds/woodpeckers>).

The Illinois Natural History Survey cites Beall Woods State Park (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/BeallWoods.aspx>) (home to some of the only remaining virgin timber in the U.S. east of the Mississippi River) and the Cache River State Natural Area (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/CacheRiver.aspx>) as some of the best places in the state for woodpecker watching. (The state champion (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/09/07/join-hunt-illinois-big-trees-and-track-down-next-state-champ>) bald cypress also can be found at Cache River.)

While the ABA's announcement was roundly applauded in birding circles, there is a tiny controversy surrounding the woodpecker: how to pronounce "pileated."

In a tomayto-tomahto kind of debate, some folks favor *PIE-lee-ay-tid*, while others opt for *PILL-ee-ay-tid*. Gordon opted for the former during ABA's video announcement, but a colleague interjected the alternative.

In a tongue-and-cheek pronunciation guide (<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/crows/birdname.htm>), Kevin McGowan (<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/staff/kevin-mcgowan/>), co-creator of Cornell Lab's "All About Birds" site, cleared up the matter. The correct answer is whichever one a person prefers — both are in the dictionary. "Lighten up," McGowan wrote. "They're just birds, for goodness sakes, and they don't care what you call them."



Amer. Birding Assoc. 
@ABA



In case you missed it, the 2021 ABA Bird of the Year is the Pileated Woodpecker with cover art by Juan Traviesso!

SCIENCE & NATURE (/SCIENCE-NATURE)

Illegal Dumping in Forest Preserves Comes at a Price, Financially and Environmentally

Patty Wetli (/stories-by-author/Patty Wetli) | December 11, 2020 9:02 am



People dump everything, including the kitchen sink, in Cook County's forest preserves. (Courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County)

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has seen record use of its nearly 70,000 acres during the coronavirus pandemic.

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Along with a welcome increase in the number of people flocking to the district's natural areas and trails for respite and recreation, there's been an uptick in less well-intentioned guests: the sort who treat the preserves like an ad hoc landfill.

Fly dumping

(https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/street/svcs/illegal_fly_dumping.html), or the illegal dumping of waste, was already a problem at the preserves, but it's gotten worse in 2020, according to officials.

In 2017, the district recorded 596 instances of fly dumping countywide. In 2019, that figure jumped to 793, a number the district is poised to top in 2020, with 742 instances already tallied through October and the usual year-end spike is still to come, said Carl Vogel, spokesman for the district.

What are people dumping? More like what aren't they.

"We see drywall, bricks, yard waste, lots of tires, sinks, old TVs, monitors, cans of paint, appliances," Vogel said.

He suspects that homeowners and contractors turn to fly dumping in order to avoid the cost of obtaining a permitted dumpster for a home improvement or construction project.

"What do you do with that old refrigerator? They see the forest preserves as an open space to dump," Vogel said.

The weirdest things are abandoned cars, he said, mostly because of the transportation conundrum.

"Do you walk home? Get in a buddy's car? I don't know," Vogel said.

The majority of fly dumping occurs under the cover of darkness, in remote areas of preserves, typically accessed either via maintenance roads or folks driving off road through brush, according to Vogel.

Occasionally though, "people pull up during the day and they've got bags of garbage they dump in our trash bins," he said.



Construction site waste, dumped near a forest preserve trail. (Courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County)

More than just an annoyance or eyesore, fly dumping comes at a price, both financially and environmentally.

Forest preserve staff gets pulled away from other responsibilities in order to deal with the garbage, which is a poor use of resources. And the district (i.e. taxpayers) gets stuck with the bill for having the trash hauled away to a landfill or recycler.

Items like batteries, cathode ray TVs, tires and computer monitors — anything considered “hazardous” — are separated and stored at the district’s Maywood facility until special disposal can be arranged. That can add up to \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year, according to Vogel.

But the most disturbing aspect of fly dumping is the damage it causes to the environment. “It goes against our mission,” he said.

Large dumps will smother vegetation and create dead zones, said Dan Spencer, a resource ecologist with the forest preserves.

“It creates an instant problem. Any vegetation they’ve covered, they’ve basically killed,” Spencer said. “We have had waste dumped near rare populations of plants. It does worry you.”

The trash that actually poses the greatest threat to the preserves — landscape waste — is counterintuitive, he said. People might think that shrubbery, piles of sod and other organic material are harmless because they’ll decompose, but that’s actually what makes them so dangerous.

“It’s kind of a difficult idea to get across. But probably the most pervasive and significant problem is the introduction of invasive species (<https://www.mortonarb.org/trees-plants/tree-and-plant-advice/horticulture-care/invasive-trees-and-plants>),” he said. “There are some invaders we’re trying to contend with now that could be from prior fly dumpings.”

As part of a garden or landscape, plants that are considered invasive can be easily managed. But tossed into a preserve, their seeds can spread or their roots take hold and they can eventually out-compete native plants.

One such example is the Callery pear (<https://www.mortonarb.org/trees-plants/tree-plant-descriptions/callery-pear-not-recommended>), a popular tree in landscapes that spreads aggressively and, per the Morton Arboretum, may be added to official invasive species lists such as the one compiled by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/INPC/Pages/INPCManagementGuidelines.aspx>).

A few years ago, Spencer noticed the Callery popping up on the site of a large prairie restoration project in Orland Park (<https://www.orlandgrassland.org/the-grassland-story>). Conservation work had been underway on the land for more than a decade, and it took a large amount of resources to curb the pear, Spencer said.

Chinese silvergrass is another ornamental plant that’s fine in a garden, but if set free in the wild will wreak havoc on natural areas, he said.

“We found it starting to establish itself in our preserves. We’ve been able to get ahead of it, but it’s hard when you have 70,000 acres to monitor,” Spencer said.

To curb fly dumping, the forest preserve district is exploring a mix of solutions.

In the event someone is caught in the act, they could be issued a \$500 citation and found liable for the cost to repair the property. The district is also sharing information via social media about the proper ways and places to dispose of items that amount to fly dumping’s greatest hits.

The district is also relying on visitors to report suspicious behavior via a non-emergency number: 708-771-1000.

“If you see a truck going into a forest preserve full of construction debris, call,” Vogel said. “If you’re in doubt, report it anyway.”

Contact Patty Wetli: @pattywetli (<https://twitter.com/pattywetli>) | (773) 509-5623 | pwetli@wttw.com (<mailto:pwetli@wttw.com>)

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Art exhibition offers ‘Messages of Hope’ on trail at Highland Park nature center

By DONALD LIEBENSON
PIONEER PRESS | DEC 15, 2020





An art installment now on display through Jan. 1 along the Red Trail at the Heller Nature Center in Highland Park offers an artisan complement to the natural wonders already on exhibition to visitors.

This ephemeral gallery includes 10 wooden boxes mounted on trees along the trail that convey, as the exhibition is titled, “Messages of Hope.”

The installation is an initiative of Chicago-based Cabinet of Curiosity, a nonprofit collective of artists that generates largely outdoor rituals, ceremonies and episodic events dealing primarily with hope, redemption and transformation, said founder Frank Maugeri.

The seeds for what would become “Messages of Hope” were planted 25 years ago when Maugeri visited Mexico City, he said.

“I saw these small cigar boxes strapped to trees and telephone poles,” he said. “They were amazing and I asked a local what they were and he said that artists placed them there so that passing business people would remember to look up and have hope.”

[\[Most read\] Update: Suburban Cook County offering COVID-19 vaccine form for health care workers only »](#)

Maugeri was moved to mount his pandemic-era installation after the novel coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease “knocked everything to the ground,” he said. Cabinet of Curiosity’s entire 2020 theatrical slate, not to mention consulting contracts, were canceled.

He said he went to his board in March and urged them, “We have to do something to remain relevant and authentic, and to find a way to engage the public that is safe, exciting and hopeful.”

Recalling his experience in Mexico City, he proposed making upwards of 100 boxes and providing them for free to artists “to create whatever representation of hope they want to provide to the world.”

He made (and paid for) the boxes himself.

With parks, beaches, libraries, museums and other centers of community engagement closed to the public, Maugeri's first inclination was to install them on telephone poles throughout Chicago.

[\[Most read\] Coronavirus in Illinois updates: 5,059 new COVID-19 cases and 79 additional deaths reported as state's positivity rate reaches highest level since mid-December »](#)

"I couldn't get the permits," he said.

Forest preserves were a suggested natural location for the installation. Maugeri credits Jacqui Ulrich, deputy director of conservation and experiential programming at the Forest Preserves of Cook County, for introducing him to Maritza Rocha.

Rocha is the nature center director of the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Preserve in Willow Springs, where Messages of Hope had a successful three-month run.

"It provided people with a place to go where COVID-19 was less of a concern," he said. "They could be in nature, which in itself is a hopeful space."

Julia Kemerer, art director at Brushwood Center Gallery in Riverwoods, saw the installation and wanted to bring it to Lake County.

[\[Most read\] The Chicago Bears are going to the playoffs — but are changes still possible at Halas Hall? Brad Biggs' 10 thoughts after the 35-16 loss to the Green Bay Packers. »](#)

"She is a fan of Cabinets of Curiosity," said Dani Abboud, Brushwood manager of community programs and partnerships. "We have similar missions and views about art and being innovative with exhibitions."

Lake County Forest Preserves were not issuing permits due to the pandemic, which led Kemerer to Jessica Reyes, nature center manager at Heller, as a creative partner.

"We are a good spot for this," said Meghan Meredith, naturalist and recreation supervisor at Heller. "COVID-19 turned everything upside down. Being able to be outside on a leisurely walk and taking in art and nature gets people moving and thinking."

Affixed to each box is a bar code that allows visitors to access the Messages of Hope website to learn about the artist and their work.

Chicago-based artist Brandin Hurley, of Brandinhurley Designs, crafted a box that has dominant motif of blue butterflies flitting about the box's edges while one alights on what the artist describes as a sunburst.

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In an artist's note affixed to the box, she wrote: "While we have been sheltering, our natural world has been healing... this is the soft, lovely patch of hope within months of such sadness and fear."

Hurley said she was moved to participate in the installation as one way of dealing creatively with the quarantine.

"Everyone was feeling isolated and looking for a way to connect," she said. "I loved the idea that every artist had the same space in which to work."

Cabinet of Curiosity has also launched a version of the installation in the form of home shrine kits available for \$10 on the Cabinet of Curiosity website. The kits were created primarily by School of the Art Institute students from Cabinet of Curiosity's School of Celebration program. The intention is for people to make their own shrine, install it on their window, take a picture and then forward it to Cabinet of Curiosity for inclusion in a newly-created window shrine website, officials said.

Maugeri said he would like to see Messages of Hope's run at Heller extended. He is also in talks with other forest preserves.

[\[Most read\] Read the transcript of President Trump's call with Georgia secretary of state »](#)

Ideally, Maugeri said, people would discover the boxes not through a newspaper article, but by surprise while walking through Heller.

"I'm more interested in the unexpected experience of stumbling upon the boxes and being surprised the same way I was in Mexico City," he said. "It's even better than (deliberately)

going there to see them. It's really lovely out there; it feels magical."

Donald Liebenson is a freelancer.

SCIENCE & NATURE (/SCIENCE-NATURE)

Officials: Seek Respite in Cook County Forest Preserves This Winter. But Wear a Mask

Kristen Thometz (/stories-by-author/Kristen Thometz) | December 21, 2020 6:14 pm



(Jerzy Górecki / Pixabay)

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, forest preserves in Cook County have provided visitors with plenty of outdoor space to roam and exercise, and they remain open for winter excursions.

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“During these months, staying away from crowds, carefully navigating indoor spaces, the forest preserves have offered a place to enjoy ourselves in a manner that’s safe (for) social distancing,” said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle on Monday morning. “Across Cook County,

(the) preserves are a place to practice self-care, renew and rejuvenate your mind and body. But for those unfamiliar with the preserves during the colder months ... it's very different than when you came in July."

Seasonal activities like snowshoeing, cross-country skiing (<https://fpdcc.com/things-to-do/cross-country-skiing/>) and sledding (<https://fpdcc.com/things-to-do/sledding/>) replace zip lining, kayaking and canoeing. Free snowshoe rentals are offered at all forest preserve nature centers except for the Sagawau Environmental Learning Center (<https://fpdcc.com/places/locations/sagawau-environmental-learning-center/>), where you can rent cross-country skis (<https://fpdcc.com/places/locations/sagawau-environmental-learning-center/#ski>). You can even go snowmobiling at a handful of locations (<https://fpdcc.com/things-to-do/snowmobiling/>), pending certain weather conditions.

"If you like winter sports or think it sounds like fun to try, go ice fishing (<https://fpdcc.com/things-to-do/fishing/#ice>) at more than 20 lakes and ponds throughout the county," said Cook County Forest Preserves Superintendent Arnold Randall.

Record numbers of visitors have been flocking to the preserves "during this difficult and relentless time," according to Randall, who said twice as many people used preserve trails.

READ: *'Green Responders' Both Overwhelmed, Inspired By People's Newfound Love of Nature* (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/12/03/green-responders-both-overwhelmed-inspired-peoples-newfound-love-nature>)

Too many visitors at the most popular forest preserves led to weekend parking lot closures this spring (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/04/24/preckwinkle-shuts-down-parking-lots-busiest-forest-preserves-weekends>). Parking is limited to 50% capacity at nature centers and select locations like the Swallow Cliff stairs to help prevent crowding, according to forest preserve staff. You can find pandemic-related capacity limits and closures on the preserve's website. (<https://fpdcc.com/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-events-locations-precautions/>) While nature centers remain closed, restrooms are open and staff remain on site to answer questions, according to Randall. Picnic tables have been removed as they normally are this time of year.

Typically, fewer people venture out to the forest preserves during the winter, according to Randall, but he thinks that drop won't be as steep this year.

“In the winter, you should be ready to spend time in the elements. Dress for the weather, starting with a moisture-wicking layer base, pay special attention to your hands and feet,” Randall said. “Bring water with you. With added layers and dryer air, dehydration can happen easily.”

Acknowledging that the next few months may be difficult, Randall said he hopes the forest preserves can be a resource for people.

“Spending time outside in nature is always a great way to improve our health, wellness and reduce stress,” said Dr. Kiran Joshi, co-lead at the Cook County Department of Public Health. “We know that winter can be incredibly tough on mental and physical health in a good year,” he said, which makes it all the more important to get plenty of physical activity and stay healthy this year. “The forest preserves can serve as your gateway to healthy and active living.”

Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson (1st District) said he recently visited the forest preserves with his three children and encouraged others to do the same.

“These have been very difficult and traumatic times for us, and we know this pandemic has been especially harsh on districts like mine where Black and Brown folks have overwhelmingly been crushed and devastated by the virus,” he said. “I’m strongly encouraging and recommending that during these difficult and unprecedented times (that people) take full advantage of the forest preserves.”

While visiting the preserves, officials said it’s vital to follow public health guidance to stop the spread of the virus, including wearing a mask, social distancing and regularly cleaning your hands either with soap and water or hand sanitizer.

And before you make the trek to one of the preserves, be sure to check for any pandemic-related closures (<https://fpdcc.com/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-events-locations-precautions/>).

Contact Kristen Thometz: @kristenthometz (<https://twitter.com/kristenthometz>) | (773) 509-5452 | kthometz@wttw.com (<mailto:kthometz@wttw.com>)

Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly explained parking capacity limits. The story has been updated.

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SCIENCE & NATURE (/SCIENCE-NATURE)

‘Green Responders’ Both Overwhelmed, Inspired By People’s Newfound Love of Nature

Patty Wetli (/stories-by-author/Patty Wetli) | December 3, 2020 6:53 am



Cook County Forest Preserve stewardship days have looked different during the coronavirus pandemic. (Forest Preserve District of Cook County / Facebook)

Their work has largely gone unremarked during the coronavirus pandemic, but the nation’s “green responders” have done an admirable job keeping nature “open” for the rest of us.

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These stewards and managers of the country’s parks, forests and natural areas have maintained trails, created virtual programming, forged ahead with conservation efforts and picked up mountains of trash as unprecedented numbers of people flocked to the great outdoors for respite

and recreation. At the same time, the people and agencies that tend to our green and blue spaces have faced reductions in resources, both in terms of personnel (be it staff or volunteers) and funding.

How are they coping? With a mix of exhaustion and inspiration, said representatives of environmental groups that convened for a recent webinar hosted by the Morton Arboretum.

Attendees from across the U.S. tuned in for presentations from leaders of nonprofits and government agencies based in Denver, Baltimore, New York and Chicago, all sharing their responses to a crisis that came without a playbook.

They heard stories of adaptation and innovation, from the Cook County Forest Preserves' formation of a COVID-19 rapid response team to a new "Nursery to Neighborhoods" program created by New York City Parks (<https://www.nycgovparks.org/trees>) as a way to distribute thousands of trees grown by local farmers but no longer funded in the parks' slimmed-down budget.

There were wins, like being able to bring back (socially distanced) bird walks, and there were setbacks. John McCabe, director of the The Cook County Forest Preserves department of resource management (<http://nextcenturyconservationplan.org/john-mccabe/>), said it's unknown what effect the cancellation of the spring 2020 prescribed burn season will have on efforts to curb certain invasive species, which went unchecked back in March.

"We missed the window," said McCabe.

Among the more procedural issues discussed: how organizations built partnerships and networked, and how they handled the double-edged sword presented by technology.

On the one hand, virtual nature talks were a big hit — more accessible and therefore more widely attended than in-person sessions, said Katie Lautar, program coordinator of Baltimore Green Space (<https://baltimoregreenspace.org/>), an environmental land trust. On the other hand, her team hasn't quite cracked the nut of how to make Zoom meetings feel more like a spontaneous, two-way dialogue and less like a hierarchical, one-way download.

Among the common themes that emerged over the course of nearly two hours: public land management depends greatly on support from the civic sector, and the loss of volunteers has been keenly felt; a spike in new visitors to natural areas has been both a blessing and a curse; and the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to have long-lasting repercussions, both positive and negative.



Cook County Forest Preserves took measures to discourage people from congregating at picnics tables. (Raed Mansour / Flickr)

Though the pandemic is still very much raging in the U.S., a study is already underway to examine the resilience of environmental groups in New York during COVID-19. It's being conducted by the USDA Forest Service Northern Research Station (<https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/nyc/people/>), and preliminary results were unveiled during the webinar.

Chief among the qualitative findings was that the pressures put on natural areas, and the amount of necessary maintenance required by a boom in usage, overwhelmed the capacity of most agencies, according to Sophie Plitt, one of the study's research authors.

Dana Coelho, director of the Metro Denver Nature Alliance (<https://www.metrodna.org/>), attested to that statement, describing congestion on trails and in parking lots as “unsafe” and “untenable” at times, in addition to the “trash impacts” of an influx of visitors.

The Cook County Forest Preserves were similarly overrun, said McCabe.

“People already had cabin fever,” he said of the timing of Illinois’ shutdown, coming at the tail end of winter.

Parks were included in essential activities, one of the few places people could go. There were weekday afternoons, McCabe said, when the number of trail users looked more like the kind of crowd a preserve might draw on a summer holiday weekend.

In the earliest days of the pandemic, with most staff furloughed for all but emergency services, the preserves' Conservation Corps program on pause and volunteers sidelined, the biggest concern was the potential for damage by an inundation of scantily supervised visitors, many of whom were new to the preserves and unfamiliar with etiquette, McCabe said.

Mountain bikers rode off trails into fragile habitat, foragers swiped plants and poachers trapped snakes, and there were numerous reports of graffiti on trees, he said.

Protecting people from themselves became one of the preserves' main responsibilities, said McCabe. That ranged from shutting down popular attractions like Swallow Cliff Stairs out of social distancing concerns, to resorting to extreme measures to discourage people from congregating at picnic tables — the tables were flipped over, screwed to each other and surrounded with snow fencing.

While operating in what he called “survival mode,” McCabe said there was little opportunity for forest preserve staff to engage with new visitors, either in the form of supplying interpretive materials or offering guidance about how to interact with plants and wildlife.

That sense of missed opportunity — the chance to educate and connect with newcomers in a meaningful way — was echoed in Plitt's research.

Still, as Coelho noted, the surge in usage does seem to have translated into a concurrent swell in appreciation for nature, as evidenced at the ballot box. In the Denver area, voters turned out to support funding for parks, open spaces and environmental education, she said.

Ultimately, many green responders opted to see a silver lining in the way the pandemic forced so many people to do what myriad marketing campaigns had failed to accomplish: It brought them to parks, preserves and forests.

Plitt said that was the most striking discovery of her research, how happy managers were to have new users.

“It felt optimistic to hear land managers were so overwhelmed but still heartened and excited to have so many visitors,” said Plitt.

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Chicago's Tumultuous Year: Looking Back on 2020

[Patty Wetli](#) | December 30, 2020 7:03 am



(CDC / Pixabay / WTTW News illustration by Rebecca Palmore)

2020 has been a year for the history books, the sort scholars will be studying for decades to come. But having lived through it — in excruciating, breathless detail — we’ve come to realize that 2020 defies the traditional reflection that typically accompanies a year’s end.

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How do you wrap up and tie a bow on a global pandemic?

You don’t.

As much as we’d like to put the whole thing in the rearview mirror, 2020 seems poised to spill over into 2021 and beyond (i.e., don’t recycle your fabric mask just yet).

But also, we love a list. So here’s our overview of the year that was — warts and all — a messy, anxiety-inducing, difficult but important collection of topics listed in an order reflective of what our readers were most drawn to on [wttw.com/news](#).

Enjoy — and here’s to a safe, healthy and happy 2021.

No. 1: The coronavirus pandemic



People line up for a food drive in Brighton Park in April 2020. (WTTW News)

There was COVID-19, and then there was everything else.

Every angle of this story dominated our coverage in 2020, from our reporting on the [first Chicagoan diagnosed with COVID-19](#) through to the [latest news about vaccine distribution](#). We provided nuts-and-bolts information on [shopping hours for senior citizens](#) during the stay-at-home order and the [best materials to use for DIY cloth masks](#). We took you to [Gov. J.B. Pritzker’s daily press briefings](#) (and met the [woman drinking along with him](#)) and [traveled across the city and region](#) to tell the local stories that mattered. We kept people up to speed on ever-shifting restrictions and advisories and shined a light on the [disproportionate impact](#) of the virus on Illinois’ Black and Brown residents, shared stories of resilience as [small business owners responded to the pandemic with ingenuity](#), and occasionally tried to lighten the mood (remember [toilet paper cakes](#)?).

No. 2: The death of George Floyd and a summer of civil unrest



Peaceful protesters take to Chicago streets on Saturday, May 30, 2020. (Evan Garcia / WTTW News)

In late May, the death of George Floyd — whose last moments were spent with the knee of Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin pressed into his neck — touched off a wave of protests in cities across the U.S., [including Chicago](#). Our reporters were on the scene as a peaceful march for justice evolved into [the first of several destructive nights](#) of violence and looting.

Surveying the aftermath, aldermen asked, “[What are we going to have left in our community?](#)” As the [unrest continued throughout the summer](#), we offered [context on complicated issues](#) such as activists’ calls to [defund the police](#) and their demands to remove symbols of white supremacy, chief among them [statues of Christopher Columbus](#). In 2021, we’ll continue to explore the systemic racism that binds these local and national stories together, along with calls for social justice, equity and peace.

No. 3: [Election 2020](#)



Sharifa Wicks-Lot, of Bronzeville, cast a vote on Election Day, Nov. 3, at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. “I have two children, an 11-year-old and a 2-year-old, and I would want the best for their future in the coming years,” said Wicks-Lot, who’s been voting since she turned 18. (Evan Garcia / WTTW News)

It was an election year like no other, if only for the record number of [votes cast by mail](#). Our comprehensive [Voters Guide](#) was a valuable resource for information about races up and down the ballot. The numbers bear out the importance of local politics coverage: Our [breakdown of the “fair tax” amendment](#) and reporting on [bar associations’ rankings of judicial candidates](#) were two of our most-read articles of the year.

No. 4: [Homicide spike](#) spurs desperate ride for #KidsLivesMatter



The “Dreadhead Cowboy” is seen on the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago. (Courtesy Vashon Jordan Jr. / @vashon_photo)

Weeks into his tenure as [Chicago’s new police superintendent](#), [David Brown announced his version of a “moon shot”](#): to bring Chicago’s annual number of homicides down to fewer than 300. That was in May. By Labor Day, the city had [surpassed 2019’s homicide total](#) and as of Dec. 1, [more than 700 homicides](#) had occurred in 2020. A number of victims were young children, including [8-year-old Dajore Wilson](#). To call attention to the #KidsLivesMatter movement, [Adam Hollingsworth](#), known as the Dreadhead Cowboy, [rode one of his horses onto the Dan Ryan Expressway](#). The circus surrounding Hollingsworth’s stunt, for which he is [facing animal cruelty charges](#), wound up obscuring his underlying message.

No. 5: [Climate change](#)



Boulders have replaced beaches in some places along the lakefront as part of the city's efforts to mitigate shoreline damage. (WTTW News)

In the earliest months of 2020, the [global crisis](#) that had everyone's attention was [climate change](#). After Chicago's [lakefront was pounded](#) by a January storm, City Council passed a resolution [declaring a climate emergency](#) — a largely [symbolic act](#). Though [shunted to the back burner](#) by the coronavirus, climate change refused to be ignored. Chicago experienced its [wettest May in history](#), notched summer [lake temperatures 10 degrees higher](#) than 2019, saw a tornado touch down in August during a [freak derecho storm](#), and tallied a [record string of uncommonly warm days](#) in November. Though Mayor Lori Lightfoot appointed a [chief sustainability officer](#) in June, the city still lacks a Department of the Environment.

No. 6: [A high note](#) for Illinois



Dispensary 33 in Andersonville. (WTTW News)

It's easy to forget that 2020 started out on a high note: Jan. 1 marked the [legalization of recreational marijuana](#) in Illinois. Our [map of dispensary locations](#) was a huge hit with readers, but that was nothing compared with the foot traffic at the dispensaries themselves. [First-day sales of pot](#) topped \$3 million, and cannabis tax revenue has been the rare financial bright spot for the state, adding more \$150 million to Illinois' coffers. Still, [complaints have persisted about a lack of equity](#) in the state's system for awarding dispensary licenses. A round of licenses that was to have been awarded in fall 2020 is in limbo while the state [retools the process](#).

No. 7: Environmental justice



Protesters gather near the Logan Square home of Mayor Lori Lightfoot to voice their opposition to General Iron's plans to move to the Southeast Side on Saturday, Nov. 14, 2020. (Annemarie Mannion / WTTW News)

Chicago's [history of industrial pollution](#) continues to [haunt neighborhoods on the city's South and West Sides](#), from a [botched coal plant demolition](#) that blanketed Little Village in a plume of dust, to an [explosion at a metal-shredding facility](#) that heightened concerns over the operation's [move from Lincoln Park to the Southeast Side](#). The fact that these events occurred during a respiratory pandemic added urgency to [activists' calls for environmental justice](#). Their message to officials: "Stop treating our neighborhoods like the [city's dumping ground](#)."

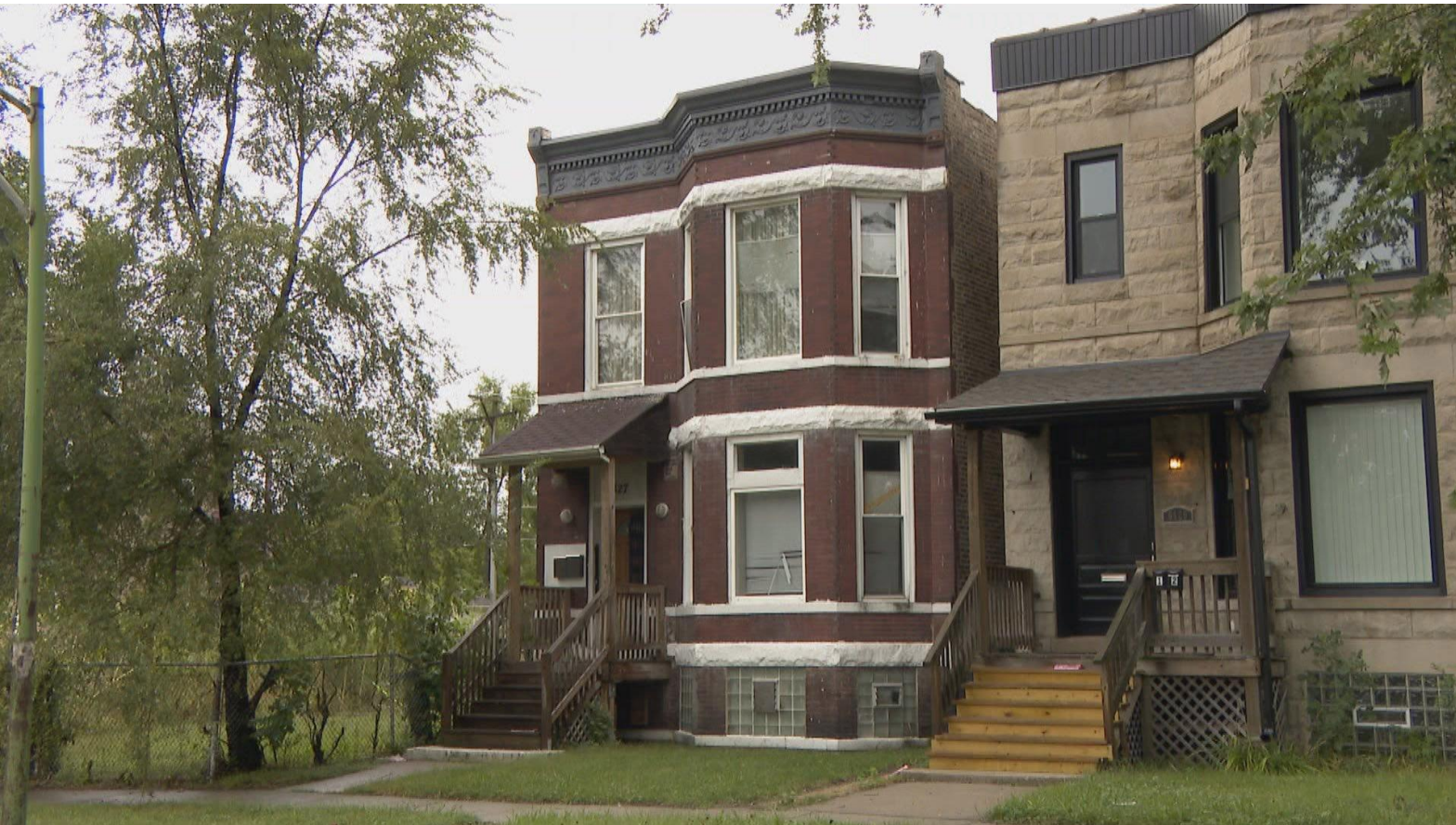
No. 8: The revolving door of corruption



Former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich speaks to the media outside his Ravenswood Manor home on Feb. 19, 2020, a day after his 14-year sentence was cut short by President Donald Trump. (Matt Masterson / WTTW News)


It feels like years ago, but it was in fact February 2020 when President Donald Trump [commuted the sentence of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich](#), who was serving time in federal prison after being convicted on charges of, among other things, attempting to sell the Senate seat vacated by former President Barack Obama. As Illinois closed the book on one corruption scandal, another reared its ugly head. [ComEd was hit with bribery charges](#), with a trail leading to powerful House Speaker Michael Madigan. [Madigan has denied any wrongdoing](#), but the state's [Republican Party made hay with the corruption angle during the November election](#). This is another story we'll be following closely in 2021.

No. 9: Redefining landmarks



The former home of Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, at 6427 S. St. Lawrence Ave. in Chicago's Woodlawn community. (WTTW News)

Chicago's historic preservation movement has come a long way from the days of saving grand old buildings designed by architecture's [grand old lions](#). In 2020, we wrote about a [South Side working-class watering hole headed for city landmark status](#), the building's owners declaring, "It's no less significant just because it's at 94th Street and Ewing." And the year's most high-profile preservation story was not [September's reopening of the massive old Cook County Hospital](#), transformed into a Hyatt hotel and office space, but the push to landmark a nondescript three-flat in Woodlawn. The one-time [home of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Till-Mobley](#), characterized as "modest architecturally, but of monumental historic and memorial significance," is poised to be declared a landmark in early 2021. Plans are to turn the building into an international heritage pilgrimage site.

No. 10: Nature to the rescue 



A red-tailed hawk, perched outside Jewel-Osco, 3400 N. Western Ave., on Nov. 21, 2020. (WTTW News)

If there was a winner in 2020, it was nature, as people rediscovered the beauty and simple pleasures to be found outdoors. A record number of visitors [flocked to Chicago-area forest preserves](#), birdwatching earned legions of new fans and there was, for once, plenty of time to stop and smell the flowers. Our coverage of urban nature likewise gave readers a break from the seemingly endless scroll of doom and gloom. Folks were intrigued by the notion of [converting lawn to prairie](#), awed by the [new comet NEOWISE](#) and rooted for the lonely [black bear roaming Illinois](#) in search of a mate. We even tried to set the record straight on [the so-called Christmas star](#). Thanks, Mother Nature. We needed you more than ever this year.

Contact Patty Wetli: [@pattywetli](#) | (773) 509-5623 | pwetli@wtw.com