



# Lexington Preserve

## Trail Guide

### Access

Two trailheads mark this 175-acre preserve's eastern border along Douglas Dr. in Lexington, just a few blocks west of the historic Route 66 highway and bike trail. Limited off-street parking is available at each of these gates with additional parking on the shoulder of Douglas Dr.

### About

Lexington Preserve highlights the unique beauty of this region's typical pre-settlement landscape; wooded ravines opening into upland savanna and prairie. Interstate 55 splits the preserve into two sections. The main 120-acre eastern section is bordered by the wooded bluffs of the Mackinaw River on its south and Turkey Creek to the north.

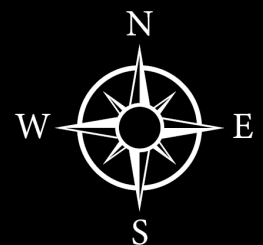
Lexington Preserve owes its humble origins to a 1971 gift of 10 acres from Lexington resident Edward Shelley in honor of his wife, Dorothy. A prairie restoration at this site still holds her name. Nearly 30 years later, ParkLands board member Guy Fraker received notice that Peine, Inc. would soon sell the surrounding 167 acres. Funds were raised in short order, and the purchase was complete in 1990.



### Trails

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| 1.63 miles | 0.76 miles |
| 0.43 miles | 0.87 miles |
| 0.83 miles | 0.41 miles |

### Key



1

## Memorial Grove

At the urging of Bloomington-area conservationist John English, early stewardship efforts at Lexington focused on restoring the rolling pastureland into upland savanna. One such project, located just within the front gates, is Memorial Grove. The shagbark hickory trees here were relocated from a gas well pump construction site east of Lexington. The oaks were purchased by ParkLands supporters and planted here in memory of loved ones.

2

## Invasive Battleground

Encroachment of invasive species is a constant battle across all of our preserves. From autumn olive to teasel, a significant portion of our stewardship time and resources are spent on eradicating them. Perhaps no species, though, is more ubiquitous and smothering than bush honeysuckle.

Several honeysuckle varieties were introduced from Asia as ornamentals and erosion control. As you descend the trail into the bottomland, you'll notice tangled monotony of an established stand. Honeysuckle dominates the understory, standing 10-12 feet tall with distinctly raised, grooved bark. The tangled mess of thin limbs blocks sunlight from reaching spring ephemerals and other sensitive woodland plant species, often leading to their demise.

As you enter the bottomland, you'll notice a distinct boundary past which heavy spring floodwaters have prevented honeysuckle from taking hold. The contrast illustrates the condition of native forests prior to honeysuckle's establishment.

3

## Towering Trees

There are several impressive tree specimens in the bottomland, including the massive, decaying cottonwood pictured at right (5-year old child pictured at base for scale).

These still-standing dead trees, called *snags*, are a mini-ecosystem in themselves. Snags provide critical food and cover for numerous species of birds (woodpeckers, nuthatches, owls), small mammals (bats, racoons), amphibians, reptiles, insects, fungi, and plant life. Over 85 species of North American birds are known to use these cavities.

There are also several uniquely shaped sycamore trees in this section. Plus, Merwin isn't the only preserve with Virginia bluebells - you'll find them here each spring, too.



4

## Just Around the Riverbend

This bend in the river provides several unique perspectives. It illustrates the many dramatic swings the Mackinaw River takes as it meanders its way to the Illinois River. It also serves as a transition point out of the floodplain as the river runs back into the leading edge of the El Paso Moraine's bluffs. The deep "hole" of water at its apex likely holds fish in the winter, which is probably why river otters have been seen here in recent years. Note, ParkLands owns much of the flood plain across the river, though it's relatively inaccessible.



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## Oak-hickory Bluff

Winter is a great time to view the mature trees that line the north bluff of the river, including several species of oak and hickory. This savanna-like ridge runs nearly 500 yards parallel to the trail until the terrain drops back into the floodplain. A line of impressive sycamores are also visible along the wetter soil of the river's edge.

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## Restored Prairie

The Lexington area maintains a reputation for raising high quality beef cattle. Typical of former pasture such as this, much of Lexington's 60-acre grassland battles pesky brome grass, the abundant knee to waist height grass with curled steam leaves.



Brome is planted for cattle grazing due to its drought tolerance and indifference to soil type. However, it quickly crowds out native grasses via sod-forming underground rhizomes, and it does not provide the sturdy cover that ground dwelling birds, mammals, and other animals need to survive harsh winters. Luckily, you will also see tall stands of native Indian grass that was successfully seeded here. Bird boxes scatter the scatter the entire upland area, providing year-round cover for bluebirds, swallows, and wrens.

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## Bottomland Forest

In the bottomland, you will find a different subset of moisture-loving trees such as sycamores, cottonwoods, silver maples, and walnuts. Many occur naturally, but we also supplemented with a tree planting in the late 2000s. You still find the occasional tree protector leftover from these more recent plantings.

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## Busy Beavers



The tell-tale chiseled stumps created by iron-coated, self-sharpening beaver incisors scatter across the stands of smaller-diameter trees on the north side of the trail. The Mackinaw is a tough span for beavers to cover, but you will still find their handiwork intermixed with existing log jams. The beavers here are so busy that their

“highways” are easily visible on either side of the trail.

Where do these beavers live? The thought of beavers brings hut-like lodges bordering a stagnant pond for most. But, along the Mackinaw, you will often find their dens excavated into the bank. There are a few examples of bank dens on this stretch of the river. Their access “slides” will also be nearby.



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## Highway to the Transitional Zone

After passing under the I-55 bridge, you’ll arrive into a landscape that differs slightly from the east section. Here, higher concentrations of shrubs are evident. We often think of native habitats clearly deciphered between mature forest and open prairie, but these transitional shrublands are the preferred habitat for several unique birds such as white-throated sparrows and woodcock. Even the nearby piles of cut brush are important wildlife habitat.

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## Geologic Markers

While nothing about these hulking green metal cabinets looks natural, they are an interesting indicator of the area’s geology. The cabinets are part of a massive underground natural gas storage facility owned by Nicor. Gas harvested across the county is pumped deep into the earth for storage within this area’s cavernous sandstone. Three of Nicor’s eight storage facilities are located near the Mackinaw in McLean County – Lexington, Lake Bloomington, and Hudson – reflecting the significant amount of sandstone here.

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## Franklin Research and Demonstration Farm

The 14-acre prairie north of the trail is that of the Franklin Research and Demonstration Farm, a 250-acre parcel that has been in partnership with the Nature Conservancy since 2005. While it is not open to the public, the Franklin family maintains a long-standing partnership with ParkLands, going all the way back to original ParkLands board member, Noah Elmo Franklin, Jr. Elmo is credited with generating much of the interest to acquire the land that became ParkLands' Merwin Preserve. This prairie was planted in 2005 with a mixture of nine native grasses and 61 forbs species. White wild indigo, purple coneflower, and butterfly weed are commonly observed. The demonstration farm manages several other important projects including experimental wetlands and a remnant oak/hickory woodland.

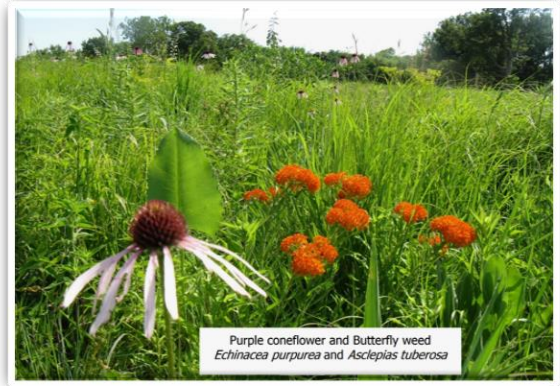


Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy's Franklin Research and Demonstration Farm 10-year report.

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## Upland Savanna

Not only does this section provide a neat view across the entire basin, but the dry soil here is made for an upland savanna. The trees planted here – bur oak, white oak, hickory – are noticeably younger than those planted in Memorial Grove near the gate, but will one day tower from this perched vantagepoint.

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## Dorothy Shelley Memorial Wildflower Garden

This 17-acre block is the highest quality prairie on the preserve. It is the original tract donated by Edward and Dorothy Shelley in 1971, and has been the focus of several prescribed burns and seedings. You are welcome to wade through the prairie to discover compass plant, rattlesnake master, prairie dock, blazing star, Culver's root, gray-headed coneflower, smooth aster, Illinois bundleflower, and a variety of prairie grasses (big bluestem, little bluestem, prairie dropseed, switchgrass).

Dorothy Shelley was a Lexington resident who loved nature and was active in the community, including terms as president of the Bloomington-Normal Art Association, McLean County Mental Health Association, and Lexington Women's Club. Dorothy died in 1991. Edward, who died in 1999, was a systems executive at State Farm. The Shelleys donated two additional parcels in 1975 and 1984, respectively, both of which border the Mackinaw River east of Lexington.

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## Turkey Creek

ParkLands does not just protect the Mackinaw River itself. Our mission is to preserve and restore the Mackinaw Valley *watershed*, including this major tributary, Turkey Creek. Turkey Creek originates about six miles north of Lexington, skirting the town's edge before meeting the Mackinaw near the northwest corner of Lexington Preserve. Several stately oaks also anchor Turkey Creek's bluffs.