

PREVIOUS PAGE: *In the real-life story called “life in Chicago,” many residents stage the scenes of their lives on sign-strewn streets or stationed inside skyscrapers and strip malls.*

On this June morning, my opening act is set in Chicago, too. It begins with an age-old drama, an inspiring show that has been performed for thousands of years, of pale purple coneflowers rising in a Chicago prairie.

Every day, nature puts on breathtaking performances in “theaters” across the Chicago region, yet most go unattended and unappreciated. Though many of these shows are performed beside busy streets, they are overlooked by people on their way to work or school, hidden behind a curtain of distraction.

Step through the invisible drape and discover a secret stage—a startling wonderland featuring a cast of remarkable characters immersed in nature’s unfolding drama. There, you can live out scenes of beauty and adventure, adding a fresh, rich dimension to your life and to your Chicago story.

THEODORE STONE PRESERVE
HODGKINS, ILLINOIS

Just minutes before the rising sun appeared above the tree line, a patina of pearly frost glazed every inch of groundcover, muting its warm autumnal hues.

But now, the melted ice has seeped into the foliage, deeply saturating the leaves and releasing their intense colors.

SPEARS WOODS
WILLOW SPRINGS, ILLINOIS



MY JOURNEY INTO THE WILDS OF CHICAGO

*A Celebration of Chicagoland’s
Startling Natural Wonders*

MIKE MACDONALD

MORNING DEW PRESS®
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS

Although they live in one of the most impoverished communities in the nation, Hopkins Park residents are richer than most. Their community is home to one of Earth's most precious nature preserves, Pembroke Savanna—a rare black oak savanna, teeming with biodiversity.

Beginning in the last week of August, the preserve puts on a glorious two-week display of rough blazing star.

PEMBROKE SAVANNA
NATURE PRESERVE
HOPKINS PARK, ILLINOIS



FOREWORD BY BILL KURTIS

“The prairie is not the gorgeous woman you dreamed should someday be yours, but she is mystery and tenderness and strength and rapture, and suddenly you know that this is what you wanted all your life.”—ZULA BENNINGTON GREENE

The tallgrass prairie is seldom praised for its beauty. The first French explorers didn't even know what to call it. The only word in their language that came close was “prairie,” defined as a treeless plain or meadow with coarse grasses. Some early pioneers, venturing from the east, found these lands to be weedy and worthless. Others called it “the great American desert” and found the wide-open expanse to be unnerving. Frightened, they turned around and headed back east to the comforting darkness of the forests. And no one blamed them.

Back then, even the Potawatomi Indians avoided the place where the prairie dumped into the great lake. They called it “Chicagoua,” a wetland that was hardly promising as the site of anything, much less a great city. The river flowed the wrong way. Mud could run chest deep. Disease seemed to ride the noxious smell that rose around the river's mouth. And yet, time would reveal the treasure beneath.

The rich prairie soil is thousands of years in the making, formed by glaciers and enriched by the prairie's many inhabitants. For a long time, it was able to resist early attempts at cultivation. But once farmers broke through the tangle of roots that made up the fertile virgin sod, the land was plowed and planted until 99.9 percent of the original treeless plain was gone. Today, only small remnants of virgin tallgrass prairie can be found, sometimes in pioneer cemeteries. The irony isn't missed that burial grounds hold native seed deposits like museums exhibit artifacts from lost inhabitants.

The prairie has long been disregarded and misunderstood. Yet, like wildfires that blaze across the grassland and bring it new life, a new understanding of the prairie is smoldering: we're beginning to wake up to its value and its beauty. That's what I see in Mike MacDonald's work. His photographs can be a spark for change; but for it to catch fire, the spirited people of the Windy City need to fan it.

American artist George Catlin and photographer Carleton Watkins used their persuasive visual images to show early Eastern America the beauty of the West in the mid-1800s, leading to the creation of the national parks. Mike MacDonald does the same kind of missionary work here, using photographs to reveal the beauty of a wilderness very few have seen. While not as celebrated as Yosemite's Half Dome at sunset, a Chicago prairie in bloom can be just as breathtaking.

Mike's dedication drives him from his bed in the early morning and through the wet cordgrass to capture first light on fresh coreopsis or to compose the natural beauty of leadplant, gray-headed coneflower, or wild quinine. The photographs document an artist's commitment to truth and all the labor required to record it, and they open a door to a new awareness: the prairie could save us from global warming.

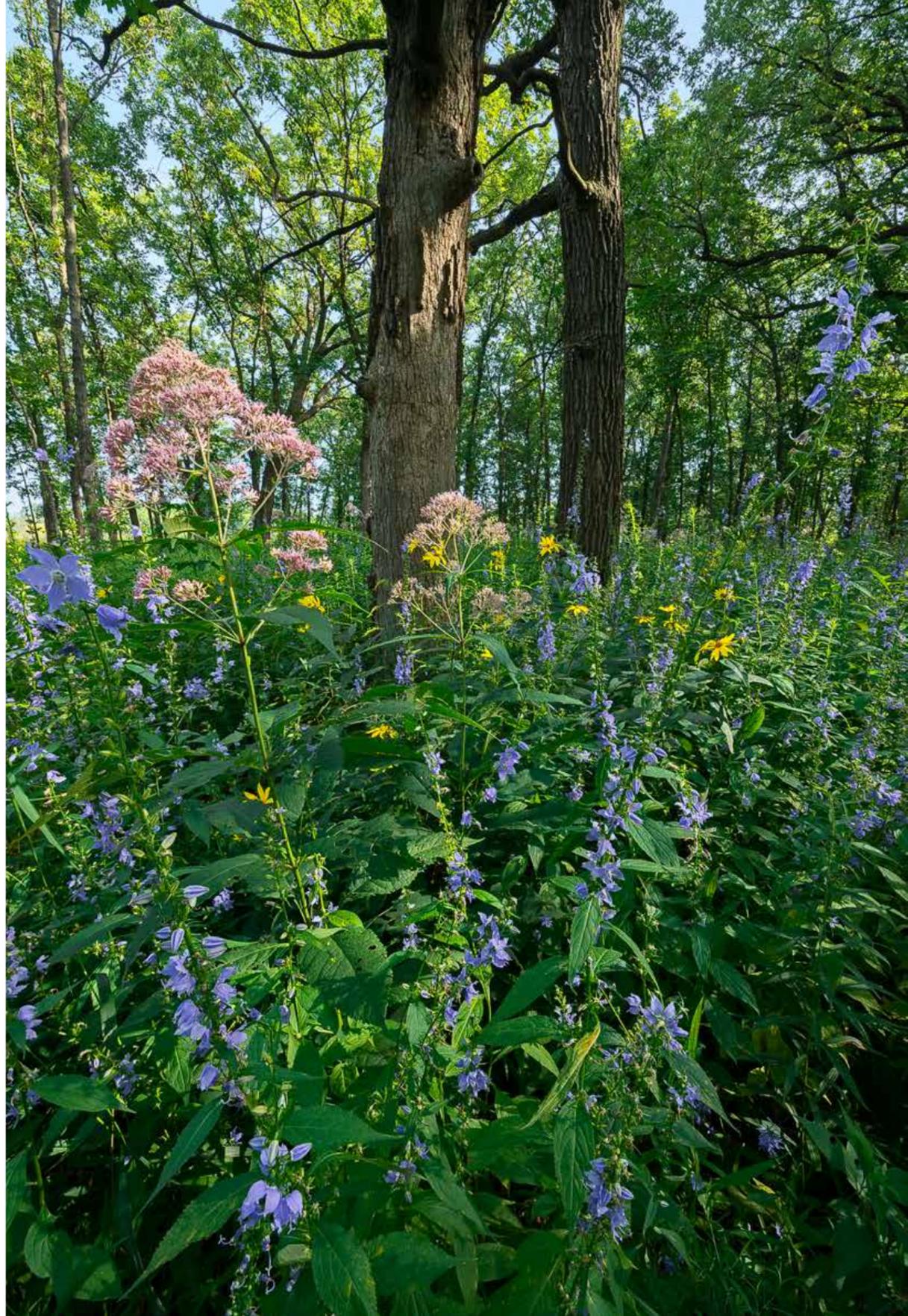
What many people dismiss as weeds are prairie grasses and forbs with roots six to fifteen feet deep. Big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, and switch grass are among the native grasses that have evolved to survive fire, grazing, and drought. Their deep

roots create a subterranean world that stores carbon extracted from the atmosphere. It's estimated that proper management of the world's grasslands, which cover 40 percent of the earth's surface, would result in an overall reduction in global temperature. Prairies could give the earth a fighting chance.

I've seen many of the world's grasslands. Just like our own native prairies, they are being destroyed due to pressure to feed an increasing population, making our conservation efforts that much more important. I predict that soon our tallgrass prairies will enjoy an image much different from the weedy worthlessness seen by the early explorers—one of magical beauty like that captured by Mike MacDonald. Turn the pages and prepare to be enthralled—and then go out and explore these mysterious, wonderful, and unimaginable places for yourself.



Thriving in the dolomite prairie at Theodore Stone Preserve are wonderful “weeds” that may hold the key to our salvation. Prairie plants reduce global warming by removing carbon from the atmosphere and sequestering it deep beneath the soil.



August under the trees at Somme Prairie Grove is mesmerizing. On this morning, I find myself awe-struck, immersed within a thick, floating, blue patch of American bellflower, a stand of feathery Joe-Pye weed, and a sprinkle of woodland sunflowers.

SOMME PRAIRIE GROVE
NORTHBROOK, ILLINOIS

FOREWORD BY STEPHEN PACKARD

The photos in this book are part of a revolution.

It's a cultural revolution, a profound change in the way we view our lives and our relationship with nature. If you're receptive to vulnerability and beauty, you may find yourself changed, too. I know that firsthand. Before I'd ever seen a prairie, I picked up a little book of prairie photographs. And I fell in love.

My first visits to forest preserves were mostly for fun and exercise. I'd race my bike from my apartment in Chicago through streets, then wooded trails, speeding by nature. But one patch of flowers repeatedly beckoned out of the corner of my eye, reminding me of those prairie photos. Finally one day, I responded to the invitation: I got off the bike and wandered into that little meadow. There I was welcomed by lilies, orchids, butterflies ... and magic. However, that little book had taught me enough to know that the brush in the meadow was killing the magic, and I committed in my heart to saving it.

Today when I visit Bluff Spring Fen, Wolf Road Prairie, and the other preserves featured in this volume, I find educated and inspired people watching birds, identifying plants, taking pictures, painting, or sitting quietly on a log. These wild places are natural cathedrals, sacred places, and I shudder to imagine a world without them. Yet they are delicate—

and would not still survive if it weren't for their congregations of nature-lovers, advocates, and stewards.

The Chicago region is a planetary pioneer in ecosystem conservation. Beginning in the 1970s, local volunteers, working with a few caring scientists and preserve staffers, made discoveries as momentous as the breakthroughs of Louis Pasteur. Instead of learning how to heal the human body, we discovered how to restore health to rare nature. We helped invent medicine for ecosystems, healing nonhuman patients injured by human development and infested with invasive species.

Years ago, a young Mike MacDonald brought his favorite photos of invasive weeds to us at *Chicago Wilderness* magazine, and he was crestfallen as we rejected image after

image. Back then, he equated weeds with wilderness. However, Mike learned the difference, and soon his lens was capturing miracles.

Now Mike has an intimate relationship with nature. He is there when she wakes on her most beautiful mornings and reveals herself to his camera in soft, early light. He often rises at 3:00 a.m. for an early-morning rendezvous, arriving at some prairie or woodland well before sunrise. Wading through dewy grass in near darkness, he finds the perfect spot for photographic possibilities when the light finally arrives.

Why this dedication, morning after morning, year after year? Mike's work is part of the revolution, this new culture of ecological mindfulness. As both artist and conservationist, Mike's aesthetic and social values drive him to spread his message through art, using his photographs of pristine natural beauty to inspire others.

Nature needs motivated individuals for her revolution. The precious gems of our ecosystem were almost lost because so few people understood and cared. Many of Illinois's rural counties have neither a single acre of natural prairie nor a twenty-acre fragment of natural woods. In contrast, take a look around Chicago. The metropolitan area's caring conservationists have protected, restored, and expanded hundreds of thousands of acres of natural remnants.

Though it may be historic, changing the world is also fun. The mission has engaged and inspired

people from all walks of life and launched many storied adventures. Mike's photographic odyssey and his poetic, imaginative, and good-humored commentary capture the joy and pleasure inherent in the work.

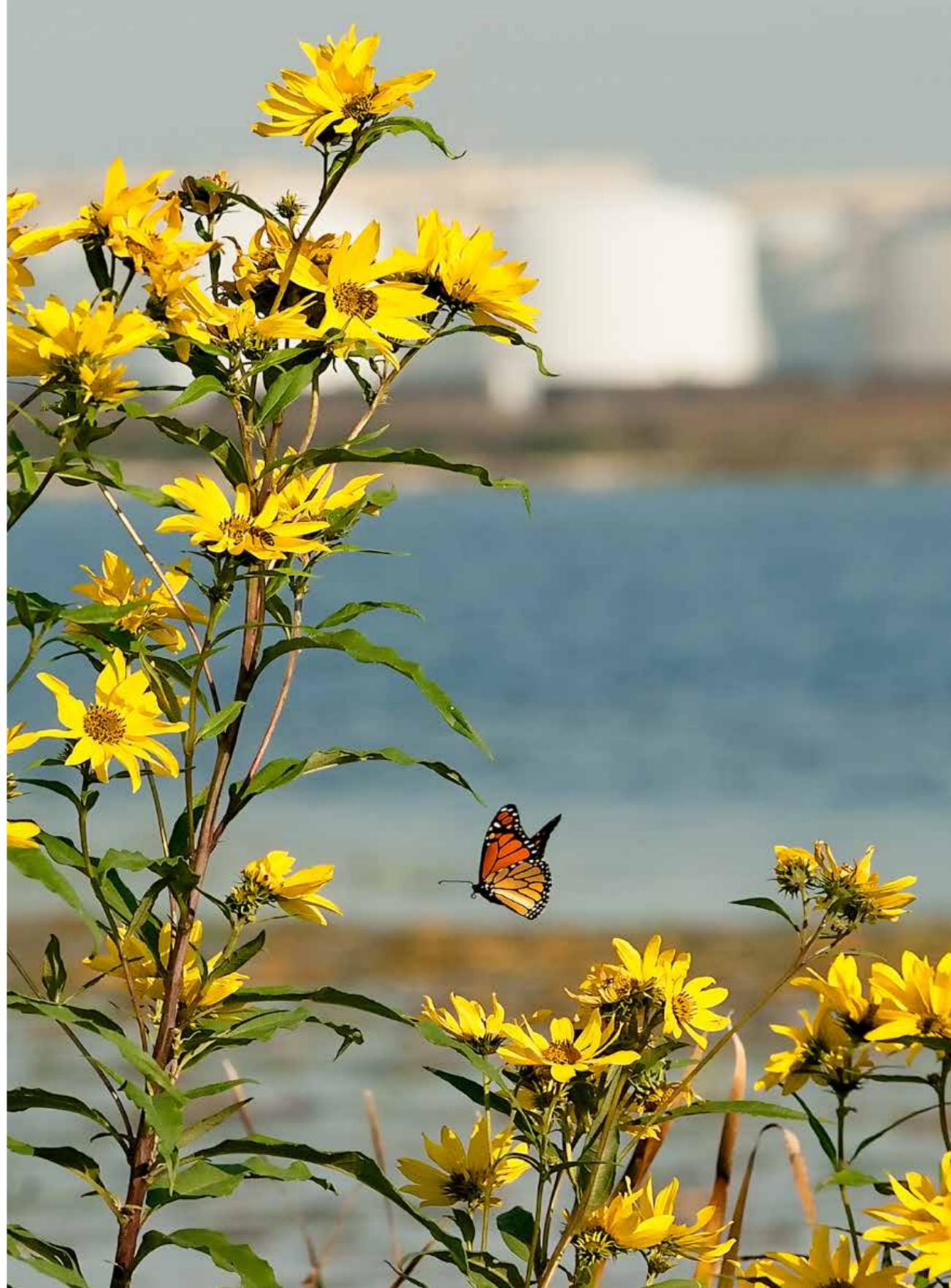
Mike's book is a personal journey about beauty, love, and passion that deserves a place of honor among the founding elements of this new eco-mindful culture. It is an artist's attempt to make an emotional connection with readers. As you turn the pages, I hope you will be inspired to step into the wilds and begin an optimistic, life-changing journey of your own.

Falling in love with woods and prairie has changed lives for the better. I'm an example of that. So is Mike MacDonald. Perhaps you could be, too.



Somme Prairie Grove is a symbol of hope—a tribute to nature's resurgence and to the caring people who nursed it back to health.

Within the heavily industrialized Calumet region of Chicago, this monarch butterfly finds nourishment as it flutters from bloom to bloom of sawtooth sunflower—proof that Chicago's nature is as resilient as its people.



PREFACE

Daisy is her given name, given by me because I can't remember her real name. From her voice on the phone and her youthful innocence and enthusiasm, I'd guessed that Daisy was no older than twenty-two. When the topic of nature came up, she became excited.

"I love nature!" said Daisy. "Especially butterflies."

I said, "Would you be interested in meeting 'the butterfly man'? He's a butterfly expert at a big museum and works with rare butterflies at a local preserve. I could set you up with him."

"Oh, no," said Daisy, "I just collect butterfly refrigerator magnets."

To claim that I was deflated would be to say that the Hindenburg had a slow leak, yet from this disaster came the spark that inspired this book.

According to Daisy, her connection with nature is the butterfly, not the one that bounces in the breeze, bewitched by blossoms; but one that is paralyzed and petrified into plastic, possessed with a peculiar passion for a particular appliance. She formed a relationship with a symbol, a facsimile, not the real thing. Daisy's relationship is not unique.

Nature has become a virtual experience, a television show by Discovery Channel, PBS, or Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*, experienced from the safe-and-sound warmth and shelter of the TV room. In this nature-free zone, we absorb electronically projected facsimiles of creation. In one documentary after another, visions of tigers, whales, elephants, gorillas, polar bears, the jungle, the rainforest, and all things Africa are burned into our brains like a DVD.

That fluffy, adorable, oh-I-just-want-to-hug-you polar bear is more than a harmless twenty-inch animal on the screen. In the real world, it is a voracious, ten-foot-tall predator that will stalk you for days and then eat you as you watch. And, while Chicagoans are unable to open their doors and experience a polar bear in its native habitat, exotic

and faraway lands are not the sole province of natural wonder. Miracles of nature are occurring everywhere at every moment—right here, right now, all around Chicago.

This book is a portal to the marvels of our natural world, those little worlds we drive past every day, those worlds of which we are unaware. But, that's not all. This book is a loving invitation to cross the threshold, to come outside and play, to connect with nature—in sight, in smell, in sound, in taste, in touch with nature—to experience

it firsthand. The sensation of sunlight and a seduction of silky seeds caressing your skin. The feeling of feather, and fur, and four-sided stems between your fingertips. The sudden, stinging splash of morning dew on your thighs and the wakening winter wind across your face. The sugary strength of miniature red strawberries and the mind-shifting sharpness of petite wild grapes on your lips. The voluntary inhalation of fragrant flowers and accidental intakes of foul fumes through your nostrils that make your eyes water and affirm your existence. The ethereal exaltations from a feathered philharmonic that float into your ears on the morning mist, the melancholy musings of a coyote, or the silly slurping sound of your submerged shoe, as you struggle with all your strength to extract it from a mire of magnetic marsh mud. The life-giving light and the visual celebration of Chicago's wild beauty into your wide-open eyes, and if you're like me, with one eye to the viewfinder. And finally, into your heart, where your innate love of nature is awakened, yearning to connect with the wonder and bliss of creation.

From the far-removed and inaccessible realm of the polar bear into a new world revealed, my wish is that you (and Daisy, too) will step outside to dance with the butterflies and breathe the fragrant floral air, fanned by fluttering wings.

As a photographer and a lover of local nature, this is a story of my journey into the wilds of Chicago and my expression of love for Chicago's rare habitats, fascinating species, and natural wonders.



Daisy lifted my heart when she said that she loved butterflies. Then she dropped it on the floor. She didn't love the little beauties that flutter from flower to flower, but the magnetic kind that clings to her refrigerator door. Daisy is the inspiration for this book, which aims to reconnect Chicagoans with the magnificent natural splendor found not in far-off lands but right here in the wilds of Chicago.

Sagawau Canyon in Lemont, Illinois, is lush and intimate, with its verdant fern-lined walls; curving, carving stream; and modest, yet picturesque, waterfall.

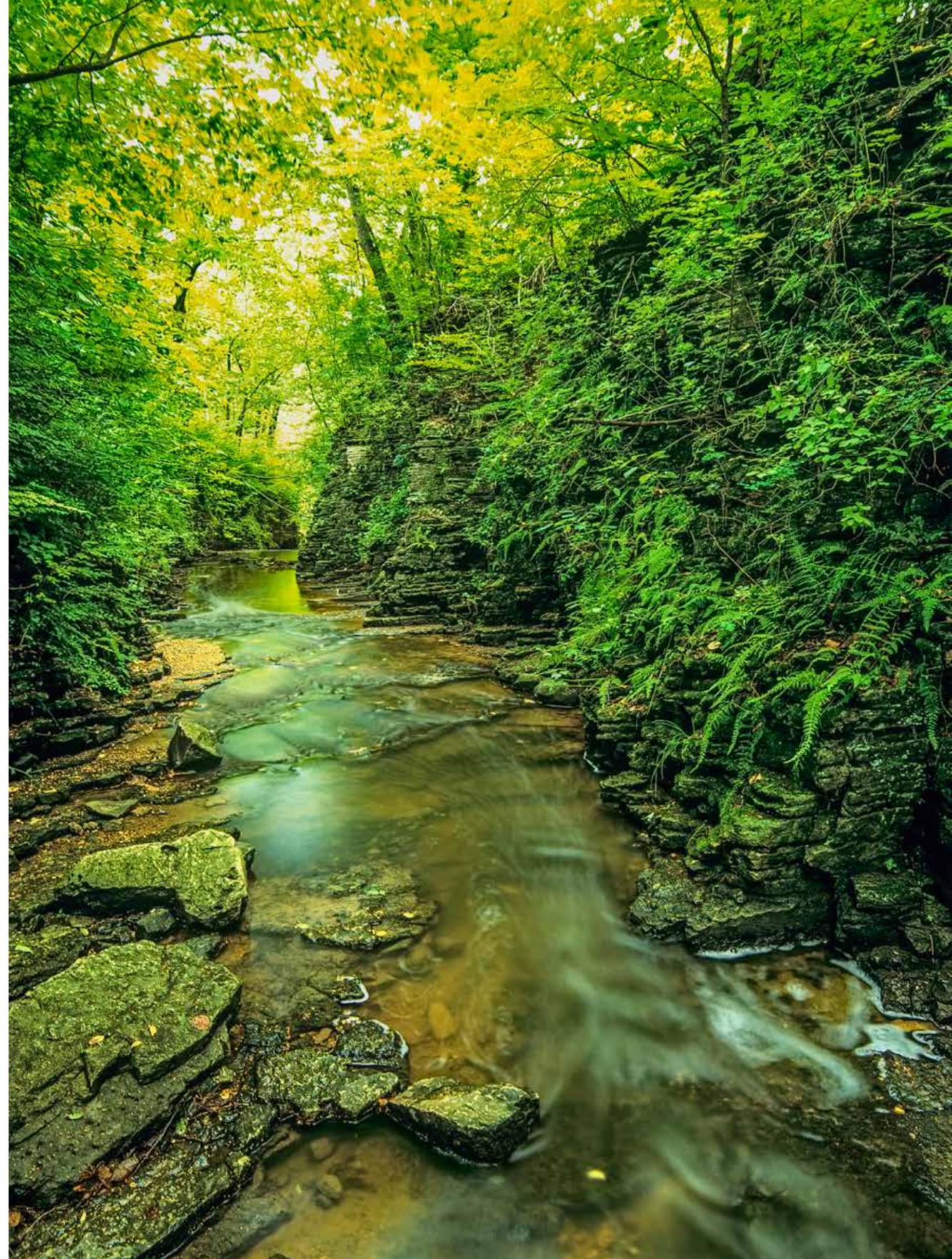
Visitor center staff have nicknamed it “the Grand Canyon of Cook County” because both are built upon a bedrock of dolomite limestone. They share the same geology, not vastness.

Visitors who expect a huge chasm will stand at the rim, perplexed, as they stare down into a gorge just twenty-five feet deep and about sixty million times smaller than America’s famed canyon. Imagine being told you were going on a trip to the 1,451-foot-tall, 108-story Willis Tower only to be taken to a toaster oven. But no one should be disappointed.

As much as the canyon of the West dwarfs Lemont’s in physical dimension, Chicago’s woodlands, wetlands, savannas, and prairies nearly match the Grand Canyon National Park in floral color and botanical diversity. In total, Grand Canyon National Park is home to 1,750 native plant species covering an expanse of more than 1.2 million acres. Remarkably, at less than one-fifth the size, Chicago’s natural areas celebrate approximately 1,600 species, offering a magnificent and ever-changing parade of wildflowers from spring until fall.

If measured in terms of skyscraper height, the richness of Chicago’s diverse and vibrant flora stands right up there with the Grand Canyon.

SAGAWAU CANYON
LEMONT, ILLINOIS



INTRODUCTION

Come on a journey with me as I guide you through the wilds of the Chicago region, using photography, prose, poetry, and the power of your imagination. But before we embark on the first chapter of our journey,

let me provide you with some insight to prepare you for the adventure ahead.

This book is the itinerary for our tour: we depart on the first page and return on the last. And though you may be used to sudden flights of fancy and setting your own course, this time you’re along for the ride. Be a falling feather and let the words be the breeze. Follow the prevailing wind and its smooth sailing. Let go, and you won’t miss a thing. Each new encounter and new discovery will come just in time, just as I’ve planned.

Each chapter presents an uplifting, insightful, or fanciful theme, beginning with a short essay embellished with immersive photography and rich captions. And though the photographs are seductive and captivating, the colorful imagery of the words provides the action. Palpable descriptions pull you into the adventure and consume you in the moment.

Along our way, we’ll experience the smells of nature: the good, the bad, and the oh-so-bad. We’ll ponder the morning and the light, the dew and the don’t, the music of the songbirds, the winters and the springs, the magic and the monsters, and the hope that nature brings.

Our itinerary includes visits to two dozen special preserves, inspirational and exciting places that you really must see. In addition to natural beauty, these places possess two exhilarating qualities: biodiversity and an escape from everyday life. But that’s a lot different than it used to be.

All of my life, I believed that because nature was green, then all green was beautiful and all green was good. Yet in truth, I was the green one. I had no idea that the emerald fields of my youth may well have been battlefields in a slow, quiet war started by just a handful of olive-colored alien marauders. Quickly multiplying, they invade,

gradually exterminating vast populations of native plant species and forcing the animals that depend on these vanquished plants to find homes elsewhere—replacing the music and bustle of life with a ghostly silence. Entranced by the green of nature, I was

oblivious to my surroundings, unable to discern fact from fantasy, good from evil. Then came *Chicago Wilderness* magazine and the beginning of my nature education. Soon I arrived at a new definition of beauty, one that required an array of species, a diversity of life. Biodiversity.

Yet, biodiversity alone was not enough to make me fall in love with a place. I needed an emotional connection and an escape, a sweet retreat from technology and the worries of life. It makes sense, then, that many of my favorite spots are large and show little sign of humanity: no roads, no buildings, no power lines.

Through my eyes and my lens, we will visit many locations: prairies and fens, woodlands and wetlands, sand dunes and sloughs.

You’ll be awed by the prairie, as rays of lemon-colored blooms and feathery grasses soar above your outstretched fingers, as pearls of morning dew expose hidden dragonflies and nearly invisible spider webs, as bees emerge from wind-blown blossoms, and as towering infernos reinvigorate life.

You’ll peek through the brush or through the slit of a floating blind as a red-eyed hunter lurks in the reeds and a great egret splashes into a great white flight.

You’ll experience the emergence of spring, as skunk cabbage melts its way through the snow and blue flowers stretch across verdant woodlands.

And you’ll be changed, as you witness an August prairie turn from purple to gold or watch as an amber canopy of venerable oaks is set ablaze by the autumn sun.

You’ll discover all of this and more—Chicago like you’ve never seen it before. Now you’re ready. Strap on your imagination. It’s time to go.



Photo: David Jagodzinski

Theodore Stone Preserve is a peaceful, verdant oasis in a desert of malls and roadways, just one of the many places we’ll visit on our journey. Here I am, appreciating its many wonders.

SECOND CITY, SECOND TO NONE

Evening falls upon the land. Perched high on cattails above the orange wetland, a competitive chorus of red-winged blackbirds relentlessly hails, ending the day exactly as they began it. Just above the tree line, a great blue heron flies home to roost. Squadrons of dragonflies, once aggressively buzzing the skies on sorties, helicopter into the camouflage of low-lying grasses to spend the night. Shapes of white-tailed deer silently slip into the open prairie. From across the slough, I hear the forlorn lament of a clandestine coyote. Appearing from behind the brush, it sees my human figure and then nervously vanishes into the thicket. In the final light, a peculiar silhouette flickers against the fading sky. With pointy wings flitting, a bat dances in the heavy air, mere feet above my head. These are just some of my experiences in the wilds of the region known as Chicago.

Chicago, the city and my home town, is known by nicknames, most notably “The Windy City,” “Chi-Town,” “City of the Big Shoulders,” “The City That Works,” “That Toddlin’ Town,” and less familiarly as “City in a Garden,” “The Big Onion,” and “Paris on the Prairie.” And, finally, there’s “Second City,” critically coined by a New York writer who didn’t have a clue.

Chicago is celebrated and remembered for hundreds of reasons. For most people, I imagine what first comes to mind is the majestic skyline or idyllic lakefront. Our memories instantly equate Chicago with its most impressive structural icons: Willis Tower, John Hancock Center, Wrigley Building, Buckingham Fountain, Adler Planetarium, Field Museum, Millennium Park (with the enormous spitting fountain and the Bean). And the list goes on. More than just memorable, these famous places are symbols that evoke the spirit and character of a city and its people, kinetic and vibrant and beautiful, as if their very molecules miraculously contain our DNA.

However, our memories are missing the physical foundation on which Chicago was built: the prairie and the vast diversity of life that flourishes here. Chicago is not Wyoming or Montana, but many act as if they want it to be, constructing man-made mountains of their own, built of steel and stone. In a city so flat, the land is nearly invisible, yet Chicago is marvelous in ways that the mountain states are not. The name “Paris on the Prairie” may be a lost memory, but wide-open tallgrass prairie, and its

ever-changing kaleidoscope of summertime grandeur, remains to this day. Chicagoland’s prairies teem with life, burst with color, and overflow with biodiversity—hidden panoramas that easily rival the conspicuous terrain of the West.

About 225,000 acres (or 350 square miles) of natural areas exist within an hour’s drive of downtown Chicago. Distributed across the urban landscape, this patchwork of prairies and fens, savannas and woodlands, rivers and streams, lakes and wetlands

is home to a rich and fascinating diversity of native plants and animals. They’ve been here all along, long before us. They are our neighbors. We are all scraps of a quilt, bound together into a beautiful piece of art.

I first experienced our preserves as a kid. On Sunday mornings, my dad would take my brother and me to the Little Red Schoolhouse in Willow Springs. All I remember was feeding lettuce to a big white goose, enclosed in a cage in front of the school. As a college student, I enjoyed picnics in the woods. In my late twenties, I explored the trails by mountain bike. Then, in my early thirties, I discovered nature photography.

Thrilled by the possibility of capturing a fleeting moment and the challenge of no second chances, I was drawn to the great outdoors by the ever-changing whims of Mother Nature: one day no animals, multitudes the next, or maybe the

day after that. She unpredictably employs weather to spontaneously alter the landscape. Following a hard rain, a once arid plain overflows with life. Fog transforms a stark familiar world into a land shrouded in mystery. Spiteful windstorms scatter the dangling colors of autumn onto the gray ground of winter. Yesterday’s winter woodland, naked and bleak, is today’s white and dazzling enchanted forest. These are just some of the reasons why Chicago’s wilderness became my photographic studio and a respite from modern life.

To photographically communicate the story, the celebration, of Chicago’s rare and natural glory requires an appreciation of beauty on a more intimate scale. Whereas mountains thundering above the plains demand our attention, Chicago’s peaceful wetlands quietly invite us, through the calls of red-winged blackbirds perched atop swaying cattails. In our prairies, flowers and grasses undulate in the breeze to gently wave us in.



In August, colonies of swamp rose mallow, with blooms the size of your hand, can be found along the shores of our local wetlands. | LONG JOHN SLOUGH, WILLOW SPRINGS, ILLINOIS

Chicago’s wetlands have a song. It rings out across the water, emanating from the highest reeds. As night approaches at McGinnis Slough, a red-winged blackbird sings the day’s final refrain.

MCGINNIS SLOUGH
ORLAND PARK, ILLINOIS

One summer, I spent some time in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, an adventure that included a six-day backcountry trip in the southern Tetons and Alaska Basin. I saw bison, mule deer, a trumpeter swan swimming with her fluffy cygnet, and a cow moose with her awkward calf. At 10,800 feet, streams emerged from glaciers covered in snow, pink with algae. In the canyons, aromatic fields of wildflowers, brimming with lupine and Indian paintbrush, were abuzz with bees and hummingbirds. Never-ending vistas of grandeur surrounded me at all times.

During the trip home from the splendor, majesty, and sheer vastness of the mountains, I worried that I would no longer view the mosaic of Chicago's wild places with the same wonder and awe that I did just two weeks earlier. I put my feelings to the test with a visit to a beloved location, McGinnis Slough in nearby Orland Park. Not just a wildlife refuge, McGinnis Slough was my refuge from the urban turmoil. Dressed in chest waders, I'd always enjoyed photographing wading birds from inside a floating blind. But now that I'd encountered such vast beauty, how would I feel about this place? Would my experience of McGinnis Slough be small and trivial in comparison?

The slough was just a fifteen-minute drive from my home. I usually took the scenic route, traversing roads through DuPage County's Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve and the heart of Cook County's Palos & Sag forest preserves. No more than twelve minutes into the drive, a stunning display of wildflowers suddenly appeared along the nearby shores of Long John and Crawdad Sloughs. Hundreds of swamp rose mallows, pink, white, and fuchsia, all the size of my hand, festooned the shoreline. The pageantry was captivating.

The unexpected discovery was uplifting. But, so recently seduced by grand vistas of the West, I wanted more proof that I hadn't been jaded. During the remaining nine miles to McGinnis Slough, I kept tabs on my emotions. As I neared the wetland, tall reeds and the dense foliage of shoreline trees obscured my view of the water. As my car sped past the verdant veil of greenery, through the slits I could see flashes of light—flashes of white. My heart began to pound. Quickly, I parked at the first pull-off and quietly exited the vehicle. Crouching and crawling, I attempted to conceal my presence from what I had hoped to see.

Separated from the slough by pickets of emerald reeds, I peered stealthily through the open spaces where I beheld a sight that in every way equaled the splendor of the West. Those flashes of white reflected a magnificent gathering. Fishing in the low August waters, silent and still, were more than seventy-five great egrets, each over a meter tall.

Suddenly, it was clear: the natural beauty of the Second City was second to none because miracles of nature abound around "That Toddlin' Town."

A week of backpacking in the Grand Tetons had left me wondering whether Chicago's natural wonders could measure up. But my fears were put to rest when I returned to McGinnis Slough to find, wading in the water, a great egret and over seventy-five of her friends. With a wingspan of up to five and a half feet, this elegant and commanding species is just one of the many natural wonders that make Chicago second to none.

MCGINNIS SLOUGH
ORLAND PARK, ILLINOIS





Coyotes are survivors, able to make themselves at home just about anywhere they choose, whether it be a quiet preserve or your busy neighborhood. In Cook County alone, it is estimated that 1,500 to 2,000 coyotes secretly live alongside the county's five million human inhabitants, most travelling like ghosts in the night to avoid interactions with people.

Here, at the vibrant end of this winter day, a solitary coyote ventures across the frozen Saganashkee Slough, an untamed area just a few miles from the suburbs of Palos Heights and Willow Springs.

SAGANASHKEE SLOUGH
PALOS HILLS, ILLINOIS

The wilds of Chicago can rival the tragedy and drama of the African plains. Within the wind-swept prairie, the death of this sick, suffering white-tailed deer provided life to coyotes toiling to survive the fierce winter.

ILLINOIS BEACH NATURE PRESERVE
ZION, ILLINOIS



This Chicago scene is reminiscent of silver winters in Yosemite, where every inch of exposed landscape is covered in heavy snow and every bough bows in deference to sublime beauty. Here, the rising curtain of morning revealed an abundance of sticky snow that had fallen during the night, draping every available surface with a shining cloak of blue-white magic in a paradise all our own.

SPEARS WOODS
WILLOW SPRINGS, ILLINOIS

To find prairies rich in biological diversity, there's no place like home.

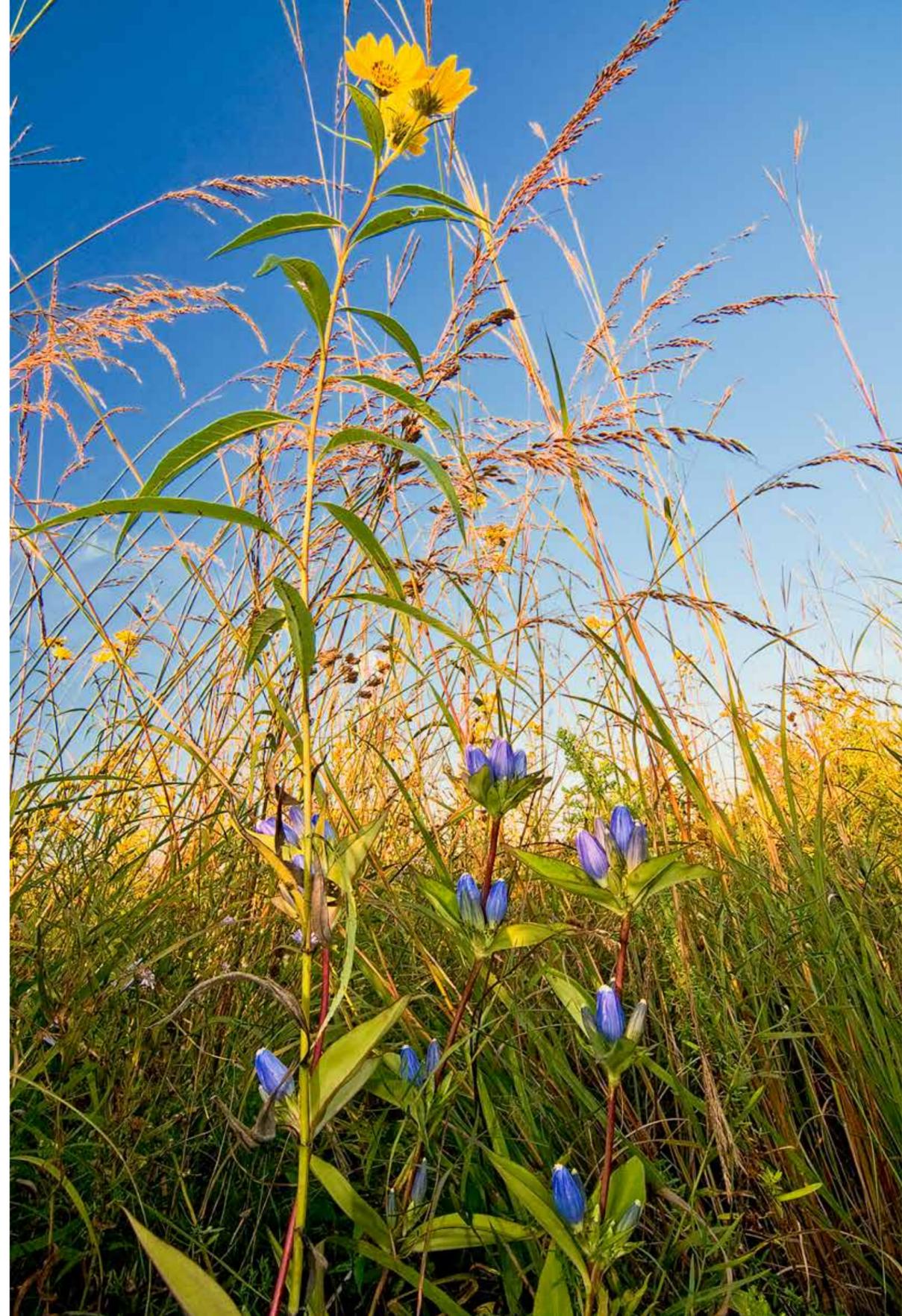
On this July day, ivory sprays of wild quinine, spiny spheres of rattlesnake master, silver rockets of Culver's root, and flowering fingers of early goldenrod come into synchronous bloom with sunny blossoms of rosinweed, lavender puffs of bergamot, and long purple spikes of prairie blazing star.

WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE
WESTCHESTER, ILLINOIS



Here on the high dunes, the vast dense carpet of wildflowers and the immersing fragrance of blue lupines remind me of Montana's mountainous backcountry.

INDIANA DUNES NATIONAL LAKESHORE
PORTER COUNTY, INDIANA



Blue bottle gentians survive under the shadow of the dense September prairie, where plants, like this sawtooth sunflower, can tower twelve feet into the air.

The West has the mountains, but Chicago has flowers and grasses taller than any cowboy on his high horse.

POWDERHORN MARSH AND PRAIRIE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Pearl blossoms of foxglove beardtongue catch the morning rays and a new day awakens—one as splendid and picturesque as any place on Earth.

BLUFF SPRING FEN
ELGIN, ILLINOIS

