

Natural features and ecosystems of central Illinois

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Image 1. A tallgrass prairie in Illinois. Photo from: Getty Images/snikeltrut.

Before European settlers arrived, the Grand Prairie covered 90 percent of central Illinois. The soil of the Grand Prairie was black and rich. It supported many kinds of grasses and wildflowers. These plants grew tall on the relatively flat prairie. Big bluestem, Indian grass and compass plant thrived in the climate and soil of the area.

Before And After Settlers

The region's black soil was formed around 100,000 years ago during the last ice ages. As huge glaciers drifted across the flat landscape, they deposited, or left behind, clay, silt, sand and gravel. Over time, these deposits turned into rich and fertile soils. Many grasses and other plants began to grow on the land. These prairie plants established deep root systems. Their strong roots anchored them during fierce storms.

In pre-settlement times, central Illinois was blanketed with wildflowers and tall grasses. Colorful flowering plants like prairie dock, common sunflower and prairie blazing star were everywhere.

Native grasses like Indian grass and big bluestem thrived, too. They grew up to 10 feet tall. Native birds and butterflies were in abundance.

In the 1830s, settlers began turning the Grand Prairie into farmland. They were aided by the newly invented moldboard plow. Farmers planted corn and soybeans in the rich blacksoil of the area.

When settlers began to develop central Illinois into an agricultural community, they changed the face of the tallgrass prairie. They plowed the prairie soils into farmland and planted crops. They grazed livestock animals. They built homes and small towns. In time, the tallgrass prairie disappeared.

Seasonal Weather

Central Illinois experiences extreme seasonal weather changes. These include heavy spring rains, blazing summer heat, near-perfect autumn temperatures and freezing winters. During the spring and summer, lightning storms are common on the prairie. These storms can be fierce.

Back in the 1800s, Abraham Lincoln's wife Mary was often frightened by such storms. She watched in terror as vertical and horizontal bolts of lightning flashed across the sky. To soothe some of Mary's fears, Mr. Lincoln purchased lightning rods. A lightning rod attracts lightning and channels it to the ground. It thus protects people and buildings from being hit. The lightning rods Lincoln bought can still be seen on the Lincoln Home, which is located in Springfield, Illinois.

Today, strong thunderstorms continue to light up the central Illinois sky. They often cause damage to surrounding areas.

