

Prairies in the Hills

Open and Boundless Prairie

When Lewis & Clark saw western Iowa in 1804, the land was almost completely covered with prairie grasses and wildflowers. Now, very little of this vegetation remains. The largest tracts of undisturbed prairie found in Iowa are here in the Loess Hills. These prairies are classified as “mixed grass” prairies. They contain the “tall grass” species like switchgrass, big bluestem, and Indiangrass; the “mid-grasses” such as little bluestem and sideoats grama, and the “short grass” plants like blue grama and buffalograss. Prairie wildflowers, called forbs, share this habitat with the grasses. Some of the forbs commonly seen include leadplant, compass plant, coneflower, asters, blue-eyed grass, and yucca.



Controlled burn at Loess Hills State Forest. Photo courtesy of Lance Brisbois.

Sustaining Forces

Wildfires and grazing animals like bison helped control the spread of trees and shrubs in pre-settlement times. Timber is a natural enemy of the sun-loving prairie. The invading woody plants move slowly up hillsides, increasing in growth until their shade eliminates the prairie vegetation. Most of a prairie grass or flower grows below the soil. If burned or grazed, it resprouts quickly. These natural controls no longer exist, so today prairie managers must either cut woody intruders or implement periodic controlled burns.

A Calendar of Color

Prairies are a mosaic of plants and animals. Visit from spring to fall to see a changing parade of blooming flowers. Listen for the song of the bobolink or the buzz of pollinating insects.



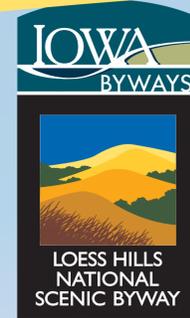
Fall brings out goldenrods and sunflowers swarming with soldier beetles feeding on insects attracted to the blooms.



Early bloomers, like pasque flowers, hug the warm ground and are protected from frost by hairy stems and leaves.



Mid-summer flowers are taller to rise above growing grasses in view of pollinating insects, like this black swallowtail on blazing star.



The Loess Hills National Scenic Byway™ is a 220 mile paved route through the Loess Hills. The 16 excursion loops make up an additional 185 miles (some gravel) for the more adventuresome!



www.iowabyways.org
www.visitloesshills.org

This project was made possible by a funding award from the National Park Service and Outdoor Foundation.

Coordinated by Golden Hills RC&D.
www.goldenhillsrcd.org

Additional funding provided by MidAmerican Energy and the Parks to People Loess Hills Missouri River Region.