



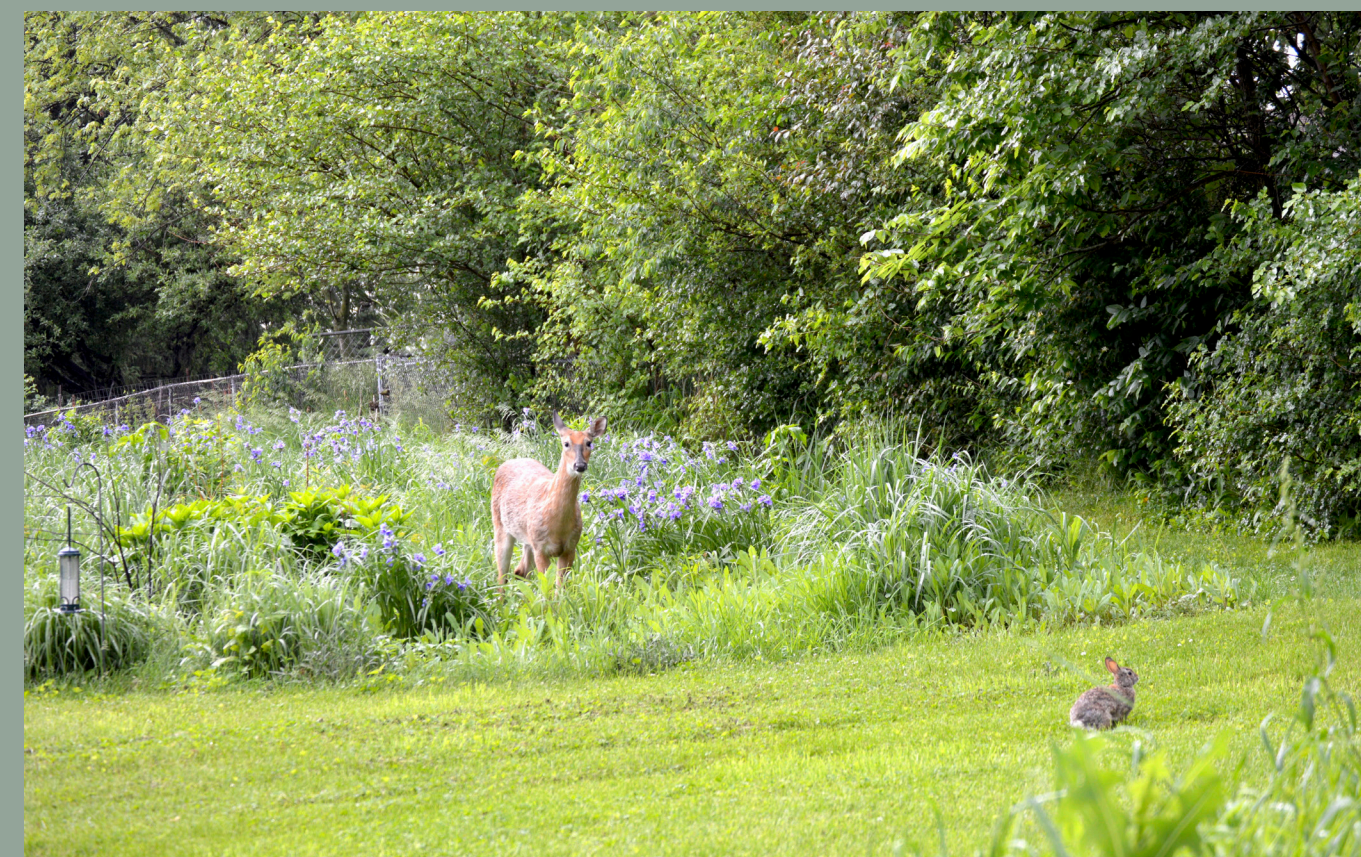
Prairies are Amazing

A Prairie for Kids & Wildlife

Willowwind's prairie strips are the result of many cross-curricular activities that began in fall of 2011. Classes worked together to research, calculate, plan, and plant their way through this intensive student-led project. The result is a native space that beautifies our campus, provides learning opportunities, and benefits the planet by creating habitat and food sources for important pollinators like bees, butterflies, and other insects.



Students using Willowwind's prairie strips to learn about plants and insects.



A white-tailed deer and cottontail rabbit visit the prairie. Both species are native to Iowa and have experienced loss of habitat due to farming and urban sprawl.



Widow Skimmer Dragonfly

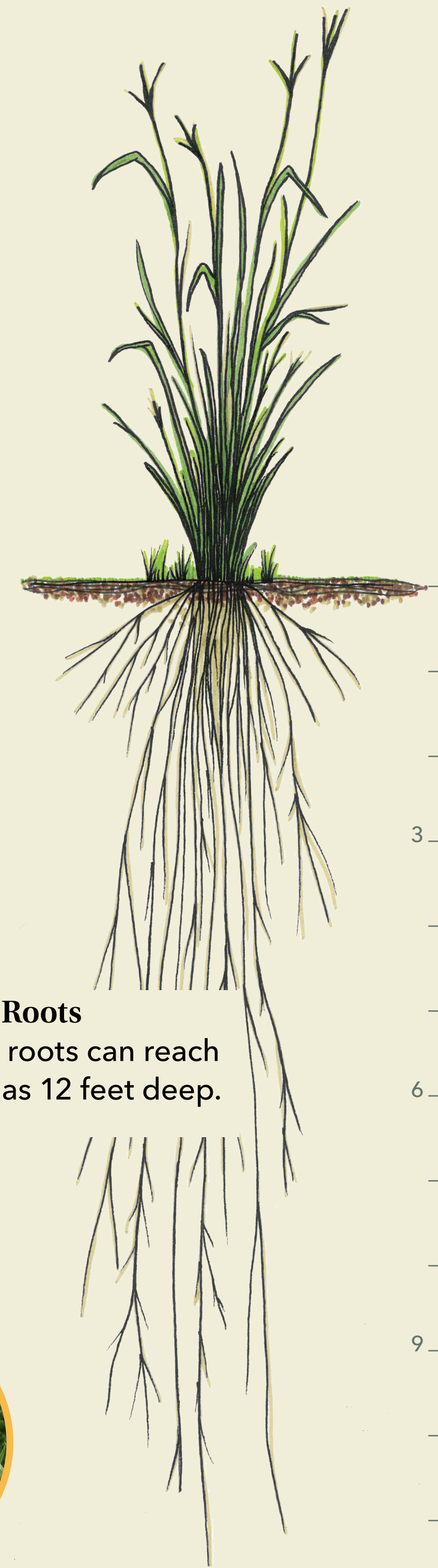
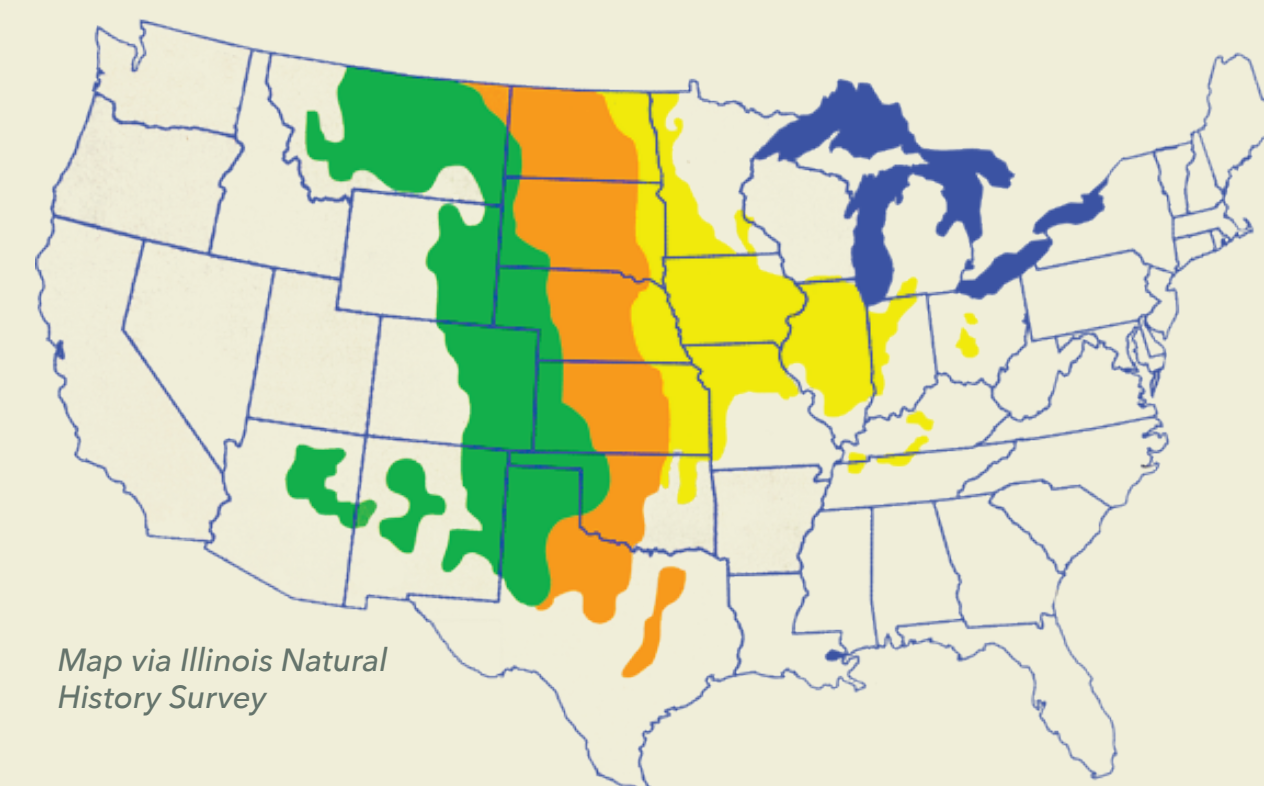


Monarch Butterfly *

What makes a prairie a prairie?

Prairies are unique ecosystems dominated by grasses and other plants, like flowers, called forbs. The vast root systems of prairie plants create rich and fertile soil, help filter water, and prevent erosion. Climate, moisture, and soil type determine which species of plants grow. There are three types of prairie that sprawl across the central United States:

- Tallgrass**
Tallgrass prairies once covered more than 80% of Iowa. They contain species that can reach over 8 feet!
- Mixed**
The mixed prairie displays characteristics of both short and tallgrass prairies.
- Shortgrass**
Shortgrass prairies thrive in hot, dry climates and are dominated by short clumps of bunchgrasses.



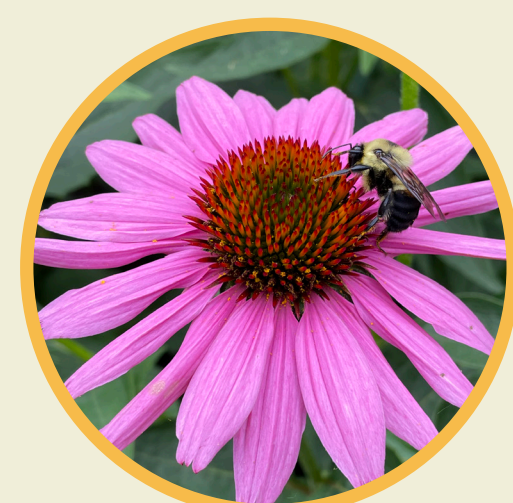
Big Bluestem



Butterfly Weed



Spiderwort



Purple Coneflower



Switch Grass



Black-eyed Susan



Common Milkweed

Prairie Ecology

Prairie communities are extremely diverse and complex. There may be more than 300 plant species present in a well established prairie. Many mammal, bird, amphibian, reptile, and insect species live within the dense prairie, feeding on its grasses and flowers. Predators such as shrews, coyotes, snakes, and hawks feed on the small prey that inhabit the prairie. These vast areas were once home to large mammals like bison, elk, and wolves. Human expansion has caused a sharp and significant decline and or loss of many prairie plants, insects and animals.

Photo credit: National Park Service



Fire Dependant Ecosystem

Fire is an essential part of maintaining a healthy and diverse prairie ecosystem. Fire discourages the growth of invasive species, encourages the germination of native species which are designed to withstand fire, and releases nutrients that rejuvenate the soil. Controlled burning will be a vital part of maintaining the health and diversity of our prairie strips.



A crew from Impact7G performed a controlled burn on Willowwind's prairie strips in March of 2021.



The dried grasses remaining from the previous year's growth provide the perfect fuel for the burn.

Photo/illustration credits: Dana Smith, Willowwind School; National Park Service ()*