

Mayslake's Natural History

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Mayslake's identity is centered on its human history and the ongoing cultural and social events hosted within the mansion and on its grounds. Mayslake, however, is also a forest preserve, and as a naturalist whose office is located at Mayslake, I have been interested in understanding the site's natural history.

As preserves go, Mayslake is on the small side at 90 acres. Yet concentrated within that space is more diversity of habitats and living things and a greater attention on restoration than is the case with most, if not all, the other preserves in the district.

What we see today is founded on the past, of course, so a historical review is in order. The land tells us that it was shaped by the most recent continental glacier, which melted away more than 12,000 years ago. That glacier had been carrying a mix of rock and soil which it had picked up along the way from Canada, over the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and down the length of Lake Michigan. The glacier rode over the surface of the bedrock, but that surface is 100 feet below us here. Mayslake is near the eastern edge of the Valparaiso Moraine, a thick, hilly section created when the glacier stalled here for a time, pushed from the north at about the same rate that it was melting at this edge. Much of the material the glacier deposited is clay, ground up soft shale rock gouged from the floor of what was to become Lake Michigan. Mixed into the clay are chunks of bedrock from all along the glacier's route. You can see this most clearly in the steep slopes around the east end of Mays Lake.



After the glacier was gone, the naked soil became the rooting medium for a succession of plant communities. The original survey sketch map shows that the northern half of Mayslake Forest Preserve was prairie in the 1830s; the southern half was mainly an open woods, with pockets of marshes or wet prairies. Agriculture took away the prairie and drained the marshes. Somehow the woods survived, and F. S. Peabody created the two lakes.

That brings us to the site's recent history. Conrad Fialkowski approached the Franciscans and got permission to begin a prairie restoration project in the area between the mansion grounds and 31st Street. That began a remarkable effort that continues to this day, with the recent addition of Jacqui Gleason and other energetic volunteers to Conrad's team. Along with the original project, other prairie areas are developing nicely farther east, divided by a marsh that has benefited from the clearing of invasive brush and trees that were drawing out its waters. The oak woodland likewise had been invaded by buckthorn and honeysuckle bushes, but over the past decade and a half these have been reduced to tiny fragments that soon will be gone. In their place are an impressive and growing diversity of beautiful wildflowers, grasses, sedges, and native shrubs. These in turn support communities of insects, spiders, and other animals.

The Food Web

At the top of Mayslake's food web are the resident pairs of great horned owls and coyotes, with frequent visits from red-tailed hawks and mink. Cottontail rabbits, meadow voles in the prairies, and white-footed mice in the woods are staple foods for most of these predators (the mink add fishes, frogs, crayfish, and other seafood). Raccoons, opossums, skunks, shrews, bats, and deer round out the mammalian fauna of the preserve. Several species of woodpeckers and songbirds are year-round residents, but these are greatly augmented in the warm months by birds that winter in the southern U.S. and the tropics of Central and South America (158 bird species are on the Mayslake list to date). The most impressive beneficiaries of the restoration work have been Mayslake's reptiles and amphibians. Western chorus frog, American toad, and Chicago garter snake numbers in particular have risen in the past four years, though last year's drought set back the amphibians a bit.

Natural history, like cultural history, is a narrative that builds through the days, the seasons, and the years. Mayslake has an excellent group of volunteers researching its human history, and I have taken the responsibility of recording the natural history. Most of my lunch breaks are devoted to walking through various parts of the preserve, counting and tracking animals, listing plants, and, in general, noting changes.

It is my hope that you will be inspired to experience this wonderful preserve yourself or look forward to welcome you to one of my public walks.