



Sauk-Calumet Group

July 2021 Newsletter Volume 40, Issue 2

My Youth in Matteson

by Patrick Coffey



Flower-of-an-Hour (*Hibiscus trionum*) frequents corn fields. Photo by Patrick Coffey

Many environmental people like myself grew up in more pristine natural surroundings than I did. They grew up near National Parks or out West where nature is much more dramatic and emblematic. Fifty-five years ago, I grew up in a small, new subdivision in Matteson called Glen Ridge. There was no "glen" and there was no "ridge", but that is what they called it. We were about a mile or two away from the rest of Matteson. Surrounding us were farms and, luckily, an abandoned farm which was grown over with weeds and grasses. There was also a creek which joined the Butterfield Creek about a mile to the north. A good thing for us to do as kids was to hike up to Butterfield Creek where there was a car tire and rope attached to a tree branch and swing from the tree over the creek. Out there was also a lot of giant ragweed (*Ambrosia trifida* L.) which we would pull up and use as spears. We would strip off the leaves and the root end we used as the point of the spear. If we really wanted to make a statement, we would leave the dirt clod attached to the root, and the added weight to the spear would make it go farther and hurt more. I am not sure though if anyone really got hit by one of those, however. Out at Butterfield Creek we would occasionally find wild onions (*Allium* spp.), more like green onions, and eat them. There were also Mulberry trees (White Mulberry - *Morus alba*), and we would eat the mulberries, too, which were delicious. There were also Osage Orange trees (*Maclura pomifera*), the fruit of which no one I knew of ever dared try to eat.

Between our subdivision and Butterfield Creek to the north (where the Woodgate subdivision is now) was a field of grass which astoundingly caught fire and burned for months. It was at that point we realized it was not just a field but a peat bog. When it burned it had a peculiar burnt smell to it. It was covered mainly with exotic grasses. These were grasses originating from Europe or Asia which now have made North America their home. One of the species may have been Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), a notorious invasive. It grows in other parts of Matteson, including along the Old Plank Road Trail.

To the east side of Glen Ridge, where the Cricket Hill subdivision is now, was another field of grass. We just called it "the field". This was an abandoned farm. This "field" had more exotic grasses in it, as well. What was so great was that, when you walked through it, grasshoppers in abundance would jump away from you. There were green grasshoppers in the grass and beige colored grasshoppers (*Oedipodinae* family) which hung out in eroded areas where the clay was exposed at the surface. They made a strange sound as they jumped and partially flew away from you. The wings on the inside had a dark colored stripe. I often think about the abundance of grasshoppers we had then and how, even in our good prairie restorations, we still do not see quite those numbers of them. Do our grassland birds - that are in so much trouble - need that abundance of grasshoppers to survive? I often wonder. There was the occasional katydid, as well. And there were what we called banana spiders (Yellow Garden Spider - *Argiope aurantia*) between the creek and the field. In addition to the grasses there were quite a few weeds. One of my favorite books about nature was a book called, [All About Weeds by Edwin Rollin Spencer](#) (1). I am not sure when I first read it, but it must have been well after my childhood. It is an old book now, but the reason I liked it so much is that it contains so many of the weeds I experienced as a child. One little index in the book collects the weeds known from different sources. For instance, it refers to "weeds of the meadow and pastureland" or "weeds of winter wheat and clover fields". When I read the book and found the part called "weeds of corn and cotton fields" that is when I realized that the weeds I grew up with were part of the history of that old farm and that my appreciation of nature was affected by the history of the land.

Here is a list of some of the weeds that I encountered as a child which were also included in the index, "weeds of corn and cotton fields" in [All About Weeds](#):

Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense* Scop.)

Cocklebur (*Xanthium orientale* L.)

Common milkweed (*Asclepius syriaca* L.)

Flower of an hour (*Hibiscus trionum* L.)

Pennsylvania smartweed (*Polygonum pennsylvanicum* L.)

Velvet leaf (*Abutilon theophrasti* Medic.)

Yellow dock (or Curly dock) (*Rumex crispus* L.)



Velvet leaf (*Abutilon theophrasti*) also grows in or near corn fields. Photo by Patrick Coffey

Other weeds I saw as a child and learned about from *All About Weeds* were:

- Burdock (*Arctium lappa* L.)
- Common plantain (*Plantago major* L.)
- Daisy fleabane (*Erigeron annuus*)
- Horsetail fleabane (*Erigeron canadensis* L.)
- Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus* L.)
- Ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia* L.)
- Wild lettuce (*Lactuca scariola* L.)
- Wild morning glory (*Convolvulus sepium* L.)
- Yarrow (*Achillia millefolium* L.)

Many of these plants are extremely common, and any self-respecting naturalist would likely know them. I am just surprised at myself that I remembered them from my youth. They imprinted upon my mind. This also points out that even experiences with lesser plants and animals can be an introduction to nature. Wherever you are at, that is your starting point.

There were also birds in the field including common staples such as Red-Winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), and Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*) with their beautiful - "Spring-of-the-Earth" - song. The greatest find I made as a child was not a bird or plant, however. One day I turned over a rock and under it was a nest of wriggling, baby Garter snakes. For me as a kid, that was a thrill.

"The creek", as we called it, between Cricket Hill and my subdivision, was where I spent so much time as a child. It ran north to connect with Butterfield Creek where the southern edge of the Woodgate subdivision is now. This creek had everything. It had leopard frogs (Northern leopard frogs - *Lithobates pipiens*), tadpoles, crayfish (Rusty crayfish - *Orconectes rusticus*), minnows, and the occasional sunfish. There were cattails (*Typha latifolia*) growing in it, scouring rush (*Equisetum hyemale affine*) along its banks (we called it Bamboo Grass, and we liked to pull apart the segments and reconnect them again), and you could try to catch the frogs in it by hand. If you have ever tried to sneak up on a frog, you know how hard it is. The technique then (though it was cheating) was to let the frog jump into the water and try to catch it underwater. You had to do that without stirring up the mud though or you would not be able to see the frog. (You had to get your shoes wet and muddy, too.) I do not know how many times I caught a frog, put it in a covered bucket, and brought it home only to have it die in the bucket a few days later. Childhood cruelty to wild animals is an issue, partially influenced perhaps by a lack of parental involvement. But for some reason in me, it has led to a deep desire to see that nature gets preserved. I have read that many other conservationists in history have gone through a similar transformation from their childhoods. (2) "The creek" was practically the center of life for me when I was a kid. The connection to nature there was strong, even though the area was not pristine, ecologically speaking. As I got older it became less important for me, but when the Cricket Hill subdivision was being developed there came a great shock. In order to make way for the new houses in Cricket Hill, they took a bulldozer and drove it straight down the creek on both sides, creating what amounted to a ditch instead of a creek with life in it. At the time I had to wonder about what train of thought led to this act. Was it just a desire to make everything neat and uniform so that the creek looked orderly? They graded it and planted grass along the banks. When I saw what they did, I resolved to become some sort of naturalist when I grew up. Though I never did. I ended up in a moderately successful library career. Now however I am involved in the restoration of the Old Plank Road Trail here in Matteson. It is a great thing to be involved in because the OPRT contains some of the rarest habitat on the North American continent, namely prairie. And the OPRT's prairie remnants are potentially some of the highest quality prairies, despite their small size, in the state. The lesson for

me is, you do not have to be a professional to have an impact on wildlife locally. Just find a conservation group that is working near you and dig in. There is plenty of room for the interested amateur.

One last story. One summer day in my childhood, my brother and a friend of his brought home a small brown snake. It was a DeKay's snake (*Storeria dekayi*). It is smaller than the more common Garter snake (*Thamnophis* spp). My brother said they found it under some plywood at the junction of the railroad tracks (which is now the OPRT) and Central Avenue. I called the snake Rusty, and we built a cage to keep it in. I do not know if we ever figured out what to feed it - DeKay's snakes eat soft-bodied prey like slugs and earthworms. In any case, as the weather turned colder near the Fall, suddenly Rusty disappeared. No one ever divulged what happened to Rusty. If Rusty died, someone took it away without ever betraying the secret. If it escaped on its own, well, that was more fortunate. I have seen DeKay's snakes on only one other site in our area. It is the trail at Joe Orr Woods, part of the Thorn Creek Trail System, across the street from the picnic area. You knew they were there because they would sun themselves on the asphalt of the trail to get warm in the mornings. Sometimes, you would see numbers of them dead, having been run over by ATV's which sometimes illegally use the trail. There are still DeKay's snakes at the OPRT. I have seen them, both dead and alive, on the trail - much for the same reasons - they sun themselves and are sometimes run over by bikes on the trail.

My hope for this article is that people will be encouraged to think about the nature they experienced as a child. Maybe the experiences were few and far between. Maybe it is just a case of realizing that weeds or gardens are sometimes nature too, not just the rarest and most charismatic wild species. Whatever your experiences, think about adding to them. Maybe write your experiences down. (I am learning things just by writing this article). Think of places you would like to go to and see. Take a camera. And consider joining local conservation efforts. In these times of dwindling and even threatened nature, there's hope and renewing satisfaction in that.

Notes -

- (1) *All About Weeds*, Edwin Rollin Spencer (1940).
- (2) *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*, by Stephen Fox (1981), contains many biographies of early conservationists.

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Guest Essay by Nia White. Nia is the Director of Jordan River Farm. Jordan River Farm is a service retreat center and community garden of the Diocese of Joliet's Laudato Si' Ministries. The center consists of a live-in intentional Catholic community who host retreats for volunteer groups to do service projects in the southern part of the Diocese of Joliet. The community will function under the cornerstones of prayer, community, service, and simplicity.

Note: Dunia means Earth or World in many languages.

To Dunia

I see you every day and you are hurting. Some experts have given you only ten years to change and reverse the effects we have caused you. People have burned you. Suffocated you. Torn holes in your soul. Your tears are drying up and it seems as if it is all turning into anger. Your rage manifests itself in fire and dryness. I need everyone in this world to understand and see that you are in great pain. Pain that we all have taken a part in.

A few friends and I have decided we are going to dedicate our lives to saving you. Without you no one of us would be here. One of my friends has decided to go vegetarian to reduce her carbon footprint. Another friend bought a hybrid car. And what have I done for the one I love most. Well, my true love letter to you is my mission. I have joined a sustainable farm, Jordan River Farm. Everything we grow is done on chemical-free and pesticide-free land. All our food that we grow will go to those in the community that need it most. We have groups coming from all over Illinois to serve those in Pembroke Township and Hopkins Park. We lead service projects in Pembroke Township and teach our retreatants the necessity of loving thy neighbor and social justice for the poor and vulnerable.

We grow healthy food, teach the retreatants the importance of nutrition and feeding the hungry. Give them the opportunity to be connected to their food source and the satisfaction of working on the land.

We bridge the gap between the many areas of the Pembroke Township and teach people from suburban and urban areas the beauty of rural life and the necessity to preserve and sustain rural areas.

My dream is for the farm to become solar powered and approach net zero when it comes to energy and waste. I want the farm to inspire people to make momentous changes in their lives to save you, Dunia. It is a lot of work, but it is worth it. It is worth it because one day when more people around the world make decisions that are worthy of you, you will become healthier and stronger.

So, Dunia, through my work I am working to show my love to you. Governments, activists, celebrities, children, and schools around the world are doing what they can to show their love to you. They are working to save you before it is far too late. I have faith we will succeed.

With Love,
Nia White

To Everyone

[Jordan River Farm](#) would like to extend the invitation to all to visit and serve with us in Pembroke Township.

P.S. Here are some photos of what we have done so far.



Victory for Southeast Side Residents

By Christy Mazrimas-Ott

After months of fighting to protect their southeast side neighborhood, including a month-long hunger strike by some residents, this southeast community got the environmental victory they wanted. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in May 2021 delayed giving General Iron their permit to make the move from their current North Side location in Lincoln Park at 1909 N. Clifton Avenue to the new South side location near South Burley Avenue and 116th Street along the Calumet River. The move was announced in June of 2020 due to a \$6 billion Lincoln Yard development at their former site. General Iron is a metal-shredding operation.

The EPA is doing a study on General Iron's environmental impact. A decision will be made after a thorough pollution assessment is done of General Iron and how the company can affect the health of the southside community. The EPA is concerned about the environmental hazards already existing in the area because this neighborhood already has one of the highest levels of pollution in Chicago. One of the EPA's focuses will be a data analysis of the air quality of this working-class neighborhood.

The Southeast Environmental Task Force has been working nonstop to prevent General Iron from obtaining a land use permit. There have been problematic virtual online hearings for public input on the General Iron move which included Southsiders and Lincoln Park residents all speaking out against General Iron. Residents were rushed and afraid that they would not be heard. Signatures were collected against General Iron in the mostly Spanish speaking neighborhood. Unfortunately, General Iron's past environmental violations cannot be part of the current decision process for the permit. Reserve Management Group, the parent company of General Iron has filed a lawsuit against the City of Chicago, but a judge dismissed that lawsuit on June 30th. RMG has filed another lawsuit trying to force the city to allow them to operate their new plant on the Southeast Side. Now the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is investigating a civil rights complaint prompted by General Iron's move from Lincoln Park to the Southeast Side. The Sierra Club is one of many organizations fighting for Environmental Justice. The [Southeast Environmental Task Force](#) is a local neighborhood group that has been advocating for the integration of industrial, residential and natural areas into a productive, green, and environmentally sustainable urban community. Since a final decision has yet to be made, this important story is one to keep following. The final decision in this case could set a precedent for future cases.

Solar Farms in Kankakee County Power Community Solar

by Ann Baskerville

Lots of opportunities are available for those who cannot have solar where they live but want to join our clean energy future by signing up for energy from a solar farm. You can benefit with lower electricity energy costs and reduce the amount of dirty power you may be getting by joining a solar farm, even if you cannot put solar panels on your roof.

CUB, the Citizens Utility Board, has a listing of numerous options for community solar and also provides tips for how to evaluate different plans: <https://www.citizensutilityboard.org/solar-in-the-community/#1587673700125-b12d2382-6775>

New solar farms are cropping up across Illinois. Three locations have been completed in Kankakee County:

https://www.daily-journal.com/news/local/3-solar-farms-completed-in-kankakee-manteno-st-anne/article_e9058032-9ed7-11eb-84b3-cbb97afb56a0.html

Update on Sierra Club Partner Organization “Pachamama Co-Hearts”

By Dorelle Ackermann



The Pachamama Co-Hearts are a local organization with the mission to bring local solutions to climate change to our area. To that end we have presented to Sandburg High School’s food classes a two-day presentation on food waste and composting which was well received. We expect to present to other district 230 schools in the fall. Please share with us any contact information you have with other schools that may be interested in any aspect of climate change solutions. We will customize and can do in person or zoom. (pachamamacohearts@gmail.com) Additionally, we presented to the Homewood Science Center on Earth Day 2021. Since “Earth Day Every Day” is an appropriate slogan, this presentation can also be modified for all interested groups. Lois Lauer, a member of the compost solutions group, organized a tabling event at the Children’s Farm the weekend of May 22-23rd. The kids loved the “digging for worms”, worm jokes and compost wheel while parents had their composting questions answered and received information on composting. This will be repeated at the farm in October. A food waste presentation will be held in person at the New Lenox library August 18th at 6 pm and we would love to have Sierrans at the event. Countries must halve their emissions by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050 to avoid the most devastating impacts of climate change. Change at the community level is necessary so please join us. We offer a 2-part training workshop where you can learn more about Drawdown solutions (drawdown.org) and how to become an activist for this existential threat to our planet. The first part of the training is self-directed and can be completed in less than an hour. The second part will be scheduled bimonthly or as interest demands. Contact us for the self-paced link. (pachamamacohearts@gmail.com)



25th Anniversary
Pachamama
Alliance

We have missed you! And will continue to for a little while longer!

In compliance with guidelines from National Sierra Club, Sauk Calumet Program Meetings will continue to be held online at least through the first part of the fall. National Sierra Club is slowly and cautiously reemerging from its total in-person moratorium of the past 15 months by allowing small groups events. Since Illinois is doing well in its recovery plan, this may seem overly cautious, but the rules apply nationwide, and some states are far behind us. Let me assure you, that we miss seeing you and look forward to a time in the not-too-distant future when we can again gather in-person. I do recognize that some members have said they prefer online program meetings. We are hopeful that eventually we will be able to return to the Frankfort Library but still please everyone, by also having folks able to join online. – *Sauk Calumet Group Chair Lois Lauer*

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Sauk Calumet Monarch Team

by Lois Lauer

Each year, Sierra Club's Monarch Team encourages both individuals and Mayors to sign on to the National Wildlife Federation's Monarch Pledge. Thanks to Sauk Calumet members Christine, Kyra, Christine, Kathy, Nancy, Donna, Judie, and Jennifer for signing the Monarch pledge, and to Mayors Doug Jenco of Elwood, Paul Braun of Flossmoor, and

Robert Straz of Palos Heights for renewing their commitment in 2021, and for Jim Holland of Frankfort and John Mahoney of Palos Park for joining the list of this year's communities committed to helping the Monarch cause. Those who sign are asked to promote Monarch habitat including Milkweed for their larvae and nectar-producing plants for the butterflies, to raise awareness and educate others about the plight of the Monarchs. Things you can do:'

1. Sign the pledge for next year, Dec 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022, and encourage your mayor to be a Monarch champion and sign it too! Here is the link to be reminded in December: [Mayors' Monarch Pledge Interest Form \(nwf.org\)](#)
 2. Start now to protect Monarch habitat, raise Milkweed, and/or raise Monarchs!
 3. Help us package milkweed seed to distribute in Sauk Calumet communities this fall, which is a great time to plant them for next year! Contact lois.lauer@illinois.sierraclub.org
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More Great Places to Hike!

By Lois Lauer

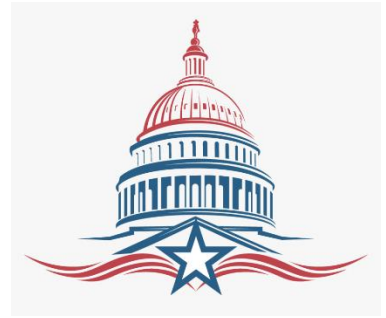
In May, we shared slides and experiences about our favorite places to hike, bike, kayak, and canoe in our local area. Will County Forest Preserves has just posted a wonderful online site of where to hike in Will County - including a few of the spots we talked about in May, but also many other really great sounding hikes. Click here to check it out:

[The Best Places to Hike in Will County - Forest Preserve District of Will County \(reconnectwithnature.org\)](https://reconnectwithnature.org)

FACT: Federal Action Campaign Team:

“No Climate/ No Bill!”

by Lois Lauer



This year, as opposed to the previous four, we have a Congress and President who are interested in fighting Climate Change. They campaigned on the issue, and now have opportunities to really make a difference! President Biden has taken several actions already such as rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and convening the Global Climate Summit, at which he pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030. There are several climate bills before Congress, and President Biden’s infrastructure plan included many climate provisions which unfortunately did not make the cut when the infrastructure bill was downsized to gain bipartisan support. But all is not lost. The President says he is also committed to another partisan bill (Democrats only, passed by budget reconciliation which only requires a simple majority) and we want to be sure that this second bill contains large amounts for renewable energy, building retrofitting, and public transit. The rallying cry is “No Climate/No Bill!” Call your Congressperson and Senator today and ask them to be a climate champion and get behind this effort! Remember: “No Climate/ No Bill!” Need to find contact info for your Representative and Senators, go to www.elections.il.gov. If you would be willing to be part of a lobby team to visit your Congressperson in August, contact lois.lauer@illinois.sierraclub.org. Thanks to Sharon (IL01), Mary (IL02), Lois (IL03), and Linda (IL11), we will be setting up meetings with Representatives Rush, Kelly, Newman, and Foster, as other groups likewise meet with their Representatives.

Illinois Legislature - Spring Triumphs and Defeats

by Portia Gallegos

Illinois’s spring legislative session ended May 31, with several positive environmental bills becoming law. First, the Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act passed with bipartisan support*. Great news! We all know there is no safe amount of lead in drinking water. Illinois currently has 12.5 percent of all lead lines in the United States. This law requires every Illinois municipality to inventory and replace all lead service lines in their community. Illinois still has at least 686,000 lead lines, and people of color are twice as likely to be drinking water from lead pipes as white residents. The law creates a fund to replace lead lines and prioritizes environmental justice communities for line replacement. It is mind-blowing that in 2021, children are still drinking lead-contaminated water, but this is a great step forward for clean water in Illinois.

Second, if you have seen the movie **Dark Waters**, you know that PFAS chemicals (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) contaminate our environment and cause several illnesses in humans, including cancer. HB 3190 prohibits incinerating PFAS chemicals. It impacts an incinerator in Sauger, Illinois and will help improve air quality, specifically in the Saint Louis metro area. Senate Bill 561 phases out PFAS firefighting foam, which contaminates groundwater. Both bills passed with unanimous votes! Our chapter is planning to do more to ban PFAS substances and declare PFAS a hazardous waste in Illinois.

There was also good news about Illinois’ Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. 2021-2022 will be the first year this program has dedicated funding. The strategy aims to reduce the amount of nitrates and phosphorus releases into rivers by 45%. Every time we see algal blooms in the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico, it reinforces how important this work is for our planet. Funding includes a funding increase

of \$4,000,000 for Soil and Water Conservation Districts and a total of \$660,000 for fall cover crops. The "Fall Covers for Spring Savings" will help farmers plant over 100,000 acres with cover crops that help keep nitrates and phosphorus in our soil.

On the negative side, the General Assembly approved extending a natural gas pipeline into Pembroke Township in Kankakee County, with extraordinarily little opportunity for the local community to comment or affect the pipeline siting. The Sierra Club and many community groups opposed the bill, but it was a mixed bag, with some Pembroke officials welcoming the jobs and economic development a pipeline can bring.

Finally, the Clean Energy Jobs Act. The legislature failed to pass an energy/climate bill. The Sierra Club and several partner organizations thought that we had enough votes to pass an equitable, clean energy bill that would fight climate change. On May 31, we found out we were wrong. Legislators came out of the woodwork to advocate for Prairie State Energy Campus, a coal-to-electricity power plant. Don Harmon, president of the Senate, refused to support CEJA unless Prairie State was exempted from the law. Prairie State is Illinois' #1 carbon polluter. Many climate advocates believe that a climate bill that exempts the state's #1 polluter from emissions targets is a lousy bill: I am one of them. The Governor has committed to almost all of the most important pillars of CEJA. I am really hoping that continuing negotiations this summer will result in the legislature being called back to pass a worthwhile climate bill.

*Information about these bills was taken from the Illinois Sierra Club, Prairie River Networks, and Natural Resources Defense Council Websites.

Sauk Calumet Sierra Club Group Meetings Schedule

Meetings are held at 7:15 pm on the second Monday of every month except for June, July and August. All meetings are free and open both to Sierra Club members and to the public. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **the Fall programs will be online using Zoom instead of meeting in the Frankfort library.** An email will be sent the week before each meeting, asking you to RSVP. A second email will be sent to those who plan to come, with the instructions and connection information for our Zoom conference, which you can access from a computer, tablet, or smartphone. We are meeting online through December 2021 hope to return to the Frankfort library in 2022. The October and December speakers have not been confirmed yet. We will send details by email about those programs when the programs are confirmed, and they will also be listed on the [Sauk Calumet Sierra Club website](#).



September 13 - "How you Can Get Clean Energy - Community Solar, Energy Efficiency and You." Please join us for a Zoom meeting with Matt Harvey, Program Coordinator for the Citizens Utility Board. Matt will present information about how you can choose clean energy for your home's residential electricity supply, including a focus on Community Solar projects and energy efficiency.



November 8 - "Coal Mining in Illinois: How Longwall Coal Mining affects Your Health and the Planet." IL Conservation Committee chair and longtime SC activist Joyce Blumenshine will talk about how longwall coal mining affects the environment and the ways it has damaged people and natural resources in Illinois.

Letters to the Editor:

Letters on content within the Sauk-Calumet newsletter should be sent to the editor at:

sc-editor@illinois.sierraclub.org

Please include your full name and address and reference the article on which you are commenting.

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The Sierra Club from the national level down to the local groups does so many positive things to help protect our planet. So, let us get out there and enjoy our beautiful world. Click below for Sierra Club Illinois outings.



Remember to check our Sauk-Calumet Group website for current information and news updates on issues relevant to Illinois.

[Click here for our website.](#)

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SAUK-CALUMET
GROUP



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