

taft times

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Northern Illinois University Lorado Taft Field Campus

Oregon, IL

A New Way to Find the Compass Class!

GPS Units Offer More Diverse Orienteering Experience

Technology is constantly advancing and forcing people to catch up and adapt. Even in the wilds of Taft, we feel this slow, steady march. This year at Taft we are very excited to offer schools a new piece of technology, Global Positioning Systems (GPS).

A GPS unit is a satellite-based navigational system that uses 24 satellites that were placed into orbit by the U.S. Department of Defense. These satellites were originally intended for military use only, but in the 1980's the government made them available for the use of the general public as well. Each satellite orbits the earth twice a day, transmitting signals to the earth's surface. Each GPS receiver can then have access to this information, which is used to figure out exact locations and points. GPS receivers are used in many common items people use each day such as cell phones, cars (On Star systems), planes, and rescue vehicles.

GPS can be incorporated into our orienteering class for those schools who wish to try something new. Currently, the class consists of compass and map work while navigating through our orienteering courses. Students will be introduced to the history of GPS and how it works. They will then be taught how to use the GPS units, and will have an opportunity to participate in geocaching around campus.

Geocaching has become a very popular activity for people all over the world. This is an adventure activity that not only uses GPS units but also hiking and some treasure hunting in order to find a secret cache. The sport of geocaching was first invented in the year 2000 and has exploded over the last six years. Individuals or companies all over the world have hidden se-

cret caches for other people to find. The goal of geocaching is to plug the exact coordinates of a cache into a GPS unit and then to track down the hidden treasure.

There are usually three main rules to go by when geocaching:

1. Take something from the cache.
2. Leave something behind in the cache.
3. If there is a logbook, write about what you have taken from the cache and what you have left behind.

The great thing about geocaching is that there is a good possibility a cache is hidden near your school or home without you even knowing about it. There is actually a cache hidden right in Lowden State Park by the Blackhawk Statue here at Taft. If you are interested in learning more about geocaching, or find-

ing out about geocaches in your area, go to [geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com).

We hope to have a full class and curriculum for global positioning systems available sometime in the near future. For now, if you would like to include GPS as part of your orienteering activities when you come to Taft, please ask your coordinator.





Educational Opportunities at the Local Prairie

When settlers first arrived on the prairie, they saw a large ocean of waving grasses, washed with colors of yellow, white, and purple flowering plants. Some were frightened by the lack of trees, the loads of biting insects, the intense humidity and heat of the summers, and the dreary, windy days of winter. Yet, many saw the beauty of the prairie, the beautiful blooms of the flowers, the endless skies, and the magnificent sunrises and sunsets. It was the French settlers who gave this landscape its name, prairie, which is French for a meadow grazed by cattle.

Prairies in Illinois endured hot summers and very cold winters, often with very little rainfall. This made the prairie susceptible to droughts, with severe droughts occurring approximately every 30 years. During these droughts, prairies were able to thrive, because trees and other bushes were not able to grow in the dry conditions. The droughts also allowed lightening to regularly ignite fires. This happened so frequently that any given area of land burned every one to five years. Fire was an integral part of the maintenance of the prairie because it burned excess vegetation on the surface of the land, creating nutrient-rich fertilizer for the soil. Grazing animals living on the prairie such as bison, elk, and deer also kept the prairie healthy. Grazing increased plant growth, promoted nitrogen cycling through urine and feces, and opened areas for plants that require some disturbance in order to germinate and thrive.

The settlers originally thought the prairie soil to be poor because there were not many trees present. It did not take pioneers long to realize their mistake and begin to exploit the fertility of the soil. There was one problem though. Plowing the soil was difficult because of the dense root structures of the plants. This problem was solved in 1837 when John Deere invented the self-scouring, steel-banded plow. This new gadget easily broke through the prairie sod and allowed settlers to begin farming. It was not long after this invention that most of the prairies were transformed to farmland. Today, less than one tenth of one percent of Illinois prairie remain.



Since large expanses of prairie are rare, Lorado Taft Campus is fortunate to be a short 15-minute car ride from the Nachusa Grasslands Preserve. This 2,500 acre prairie preserve is one of Illinois' largest surviving prairie. Nachusa is an extremely biologically diverse area, providing habitat to 600 native plant species and 180 bird species. Even rare species such as Blanding's turtle, the gorgone checkerspot butterfly, and kittentail flowers call Nachusa home.

The inspiration to create the prairie preserve began in the 1960s with former Taft professors Doug and Dot Wade. The pair were traveling through Lee County, when they heard the calls of the long-legged upland sandpiper. Excited, they went in search of this rare bird and discovered only fragments of its prairie habitat. This motivated the Wades to partner up with Tim Keller, a local farmer and conservationist. In 1986, with the help and the dreams of the Wades and Mr. Keller, the Nature Conservancy purchased the land, recognizing that the area gave great promise to restore a large native prairie. Upland sandpipers still migrate from Argentina to Nachusa, where they nest and raise their young.

The success of the prairie is indebted almost entirely to volunteers putting in more than 200,000 hours of work to restore and manage the prairie. Volunteers perform controlled burns, monitor breeding bird populations, stop the spread of non-native species, and harvest seeds for future restoration projects. The preserve is open to the public for hiking and bird watching, with volunteers periodically giving tours or bird walks. For more information on tours or special events, call 815-456-2340. Because the prairie is close to Taft, several small school groups have visited Nachusa and studied the unique prairie ecology as well as provided the Nature Conservancy valuable help with service projects. If you are interested in setting up a Nachusa trip for your students and can provide your own transportation, contact your Lorado Taft coordinator who can assist you in helping plan your experience.

<http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/~kenr/prairieintroduction.html>

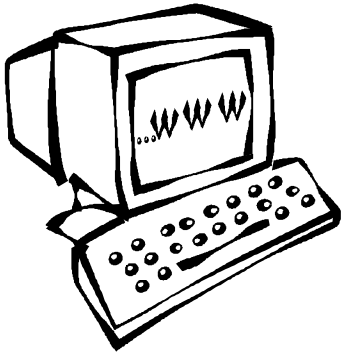
<http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/illinois/preserves/art1116.html>

<http://home.comcast.net/~wcpsg/nachusa.html>



Taft Upgrades Website

Site offers Educational, Logistical Resources



The Lorado Taft Field Campus web site at www.niu.edu/taft is loaded with information to help teachers plan and prepare for a trip to our campus. Teacher resources include what to bring lists, letters for parents, policies for use of the campus, tips to give your chaperones, blank health forms, dining hall information, a slide show, ideas for lessons, and much more. Simply click on the Outdoor Education link and go to the Teacher Resources section. This area is password protected so you can control the access to information. The password is TAFTFORM.

New to this section of our web site are teacher boxes. "What are teacher boxes?" you might ask. We have developed complete teaching lessons on a variety of subjects. Each lesson is complete in a box and has background information, activity ideas, materials, and suggestions for locations to teach the class. The boxes

are specific to Lorado Taft Field Campus and contain simple activities that are designed to keep the students outside and exploring. Many boxes also have ideas for times when the students need to stay inside. Currently, we have twelve different teaching boxes available. We will be adding more as the year goes on, so check back. Talk to your coordinator to reserve the use of the boxes while at Taft Campus.

Boxes are currently available in the following subjects:

Forest Ecology	Water Ecology
Biodiversity	Decomposition
Trees	Gully Exploration
Adaptations	Tracking
Weather	Crafts
Nature Observation	New Games

Your feedback is important to us! Please let us know what you think of the boxes and the subject areas. If there are any other subjects you would like to see developed, please let us know!

News and Notes

You may notice a slight change in some of the official Lorado Taft correspondence. We have changed the official title of the program from Environmental Education back to Outdoor Education. The name was originally changed to prevent confusion with the OE program at NIU. Many schools still describe their visits as Outdoor Education, though, so we are changing back as well!

Contributors to this issue:

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Congratulations!!

We would like to congratulate Emily Michi and Walter Sams for receiving the 2005-2006 Lorado Taft Environmental Education Most Outstanding Program Specialist Award! We are happy to have Emily back for another year at Taft. Walter, after two fabulous years at Taft, will be teaching at Foothills Horizon Environmental Center in Sonora, California.



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