Crosby Park: Floodplain Forest, Backwater Sanctuary

Nestled along the north side of the Mississippi River across from its confluence with the Minnesota River, Crosby Farm Regional Park is an oasis for plants and wildlife. As a floodplain forest and river backwater, it represents an ecosystem that is vital to the life of the Mississippi River. Ecological restoration efforts aim to ensure its preservation.

A Farm Becomes a Park

Beginning in 1858 the area now known as Crosby Farm Regional Park was farmland operated by Thomas Crosby and his family. On their 360 acres of fertile bottomlands, the Crosbys raised cattle, horses, pigs, chickens, oats, wheat, hay, potatoes and apples. Although the land was sold by the Crosbys in the early 1900s, farming on it continued through the 1950s.

The area was first proposed for park land in 1887 by landscape architect Horace Cleveland, who considered "the jewel of the region [to be] the Mississippi River and [its] picturesque natural shoreline." Cleveland's dream of a river corridor park was fulfilled in the early 1960s when the area was dedicated to be left in a natural state for recreational purposes. Crosby Park, now managed by St. Paul Parks and Recreation, features ten miles of trails from which visitors can explore a river floodplain preserve.

Photo above: Floodplain forest in Crosby Park.
Photo: L. Torstenson, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

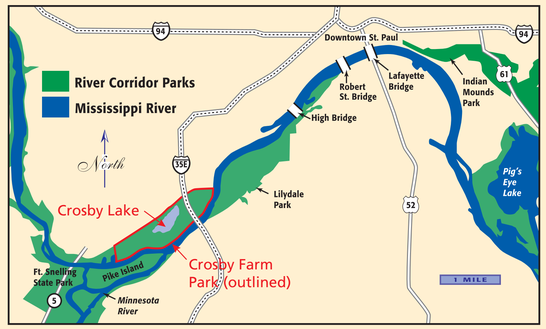
Floodplain Forest

Floodplains — lands adjacent to rivers that are periodically covered with floodwater — support trees and other plants that are adapted to cycles of rising and receding water. Rising waters in springtime bring nutrients, soils, and new life to these lands. As floodwaters recede, cottonwood, silver maple and willow seeds quickly sprout on freshly exposed soil. Eventually, cottonwoods are outcompeted by shade-tolerant trees like hackberry and elm. Other floodplain trees include black and green ash, black willow and box elder.

The floodplain forest understory is usually sparse and open. Vines like river grape and Virginia creeper wind their way into the canopy on supporting trees. Windrows of dead trees left by receding waters provide wildlife cover. The Crosby Park forest joins with other contiguous parks to provide a valuable habitat and travel corridor for wildlife such as deer, fox, raccoons, and migratory and resident birds.

Crosby Lake, a Backwater Sanctuary

The flood pulse, or annual rise and fall in water level, is the "heartbeat" of the river that rejuvenates backwater lakes and marshes as well as the river itself. During high waters, 48-acre Crosby Lake and surrounding wetlands often become part of the Mississippi. Fish species move freely between the waters, expanding their feeding, spawning and hiding areas. Receding waters concentrate small fish in the backwaters, providing feeding opportunities for larger fish, herons and egrets. Frogs utilize short-lived ponds to lay their eggs. Waterfowl nest along the shores and in tree cavities.



Location of Crosby Park along Mississippi River

Photo at left: White water lily in Crosby Lake.

Photo above: Purple loosestrife in Crosby Lake.

Photo at right: Volunteer loosestrife puller.
All three photos: Lyndon Torstenson, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

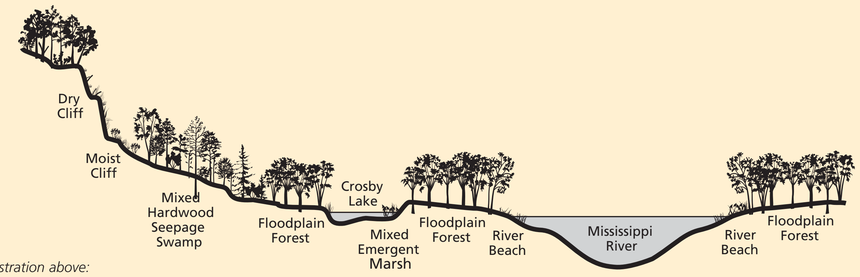


Illustration above:
Vegetation pattern at Crosby Park.
Illustration: Tom Klein, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Exotic Species and Restoration

Invasive, exotic (non-native) plants such as purple loosestrife, garlic mustard and common buckthorn threaten Crosby Park's diversity and habitat value. Without natural controls, these exotic species from Europe and Asia outcompete native plants. They degrade wetlands and woodlands by reducing plant diversity and replacing plants that have high wildlife value. Purple loosestrife can rapidly replace native wetland species like cattail, arrowhead and burr-reed. Buckthorn replaces native trees in the forest understory, while garlic mustard outcompetes forest herbaceous ground cover.

Control of exotics is a costly, labor-intensive and lengthy process. City crews and volunteers work annually to pull and cut loosestrife and buckthorn before new seeds are released. Through restoration efforts such as these, this "jewel" in the Mississippi floodplain will continue to provide sanctuary to plants, wildlife and people alike.

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