

## The Franklin's ground squirrel in southwest Springfield

In 2010, a population of Franklin's ground squirrels was found to be living along the abandoned railroad bed soon to be converted to the Sangamon Valley Trail. Franklin's often use abandoned railroad beds because they are elevated above the surrounding terrain, allowing their burrows to remain dry. Franklin's hibernate for seven months, from September through mid-April, and require burrow locations that will not flood in early spring.

The ground squirrels survived construction, but lost some habitat, particularly where the railroad bed was graded to street level for crossings. To replace habitat lost during construction, the Springfield Park District, Sangamon County and the developers of Centennial Park Place subdivision worked together to build earthen ridges to serve as places for the animals to burrow.

Now that the Sangamon Valley Trail is finished and the new addition to Centennial Park is nearing completion, a few additional measures are being taken to help the ground squirrels thrive far into the future. This is where we need your help.

For the project to work, some areas must be left unmowed. The Franklin's ground squirrel will not use



*The 13-lined ground squirrel.*

mowed turf-grass areas, unlike its cousin, the more common 13-lined ground squirrel.

## Life History

**Identification:** The Franklin's ground squirrel is similar in size to the gray squirrel, but its tail is not as bushy. The back is rusty brown flecked with black. The head is gray, with a broad nose and small ears set back on its head. Adult males weigh just over one pound.

**Reproduction:** The ground squirrels begin mating immediately in mid-spring, and an average of seven young is born in June. Juveniles often are found above ground by mid-July. They must grow to adult size rapidly and gain enough weight to survive the long hibernation. Juveniles enter hibernation in September or as late as early October.

**Diet:** Franklin's ground squirrels are omnivorous, eating plant material, berries, insects, bird eggs and carrion. You may surprise one feeding in a blackberry thicket. Listen for the whistling alarm call.

**Habitat:** Once thought to be strictly a prairie species, the Franklin's ground squirrel is now considered to be an animal of forest edges and transition areas between forest and open grassland. They are found along the open parts of the Sangamon Valley Trail and are less likely to use sections where trees canopy over the trail. They also are found in fencerows and field edges.

**Hibernation:** Franklin's ground squirrels are true hibernators. Adults hibernate from late August/early September until mid-April in central Illinois.

**Lifespan:** Males live one to two years, females three to five years.

**Status:** The Franklin's ground squirrel is listed as a threatened species in Illinois because of habitat loss and isolation of remaining populations.



## Help us conserve the Franklin's ground squirrel

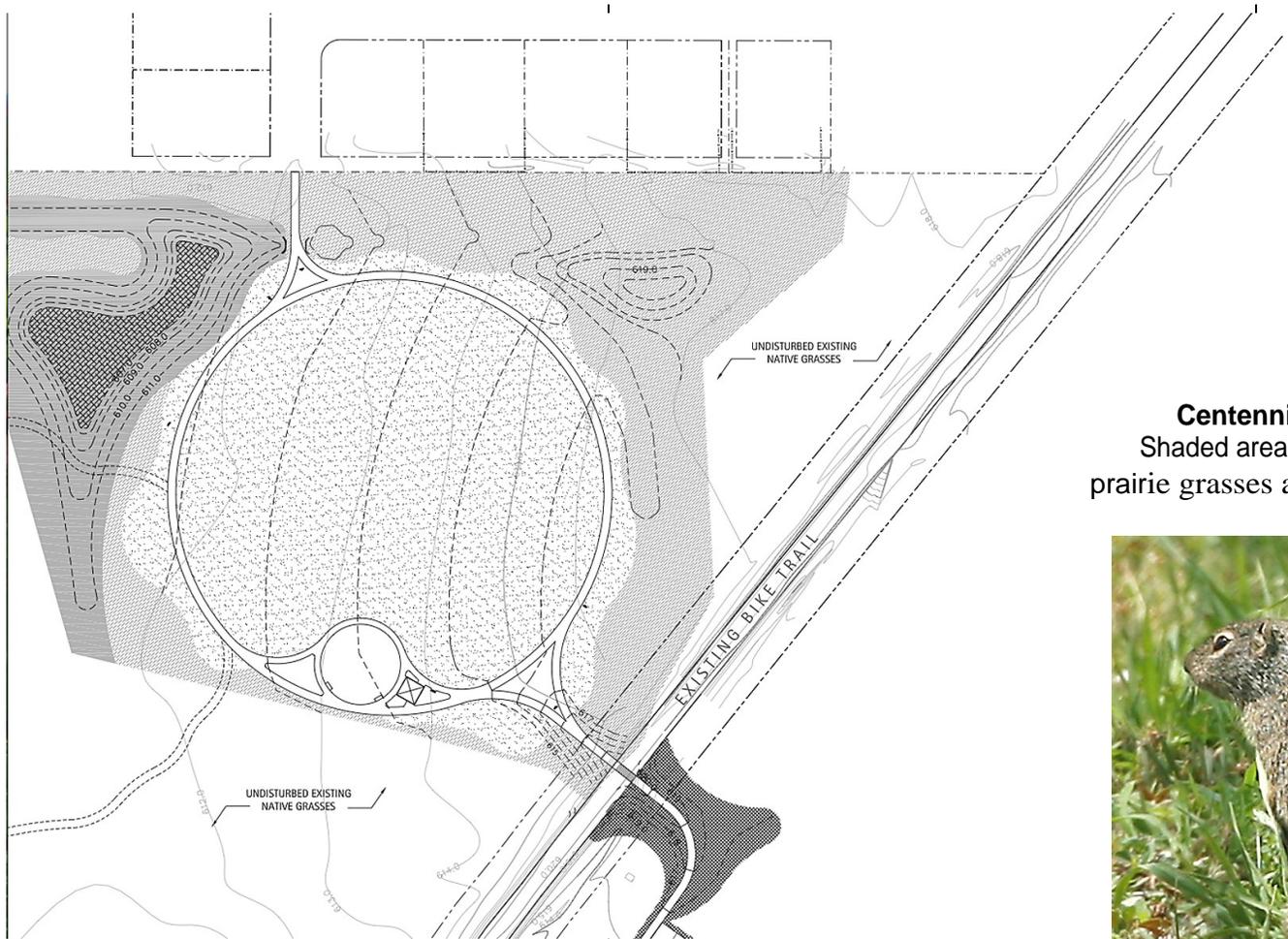
In and around Centennial Park and along the Sangamon Valley Trail

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The Franklin's ground squirrel (*Poliocitellus franklinii*) is a state-threatened species that lives along the Sangamon Valley Trail between Bunker Hill Road and Archery Elevator Road. It also lives along the undeveloped portions of the railroad bed south of Springfield. It is the largest concentration of Franklin's ground squirrels known in the state.

Many partners worked together to protect the ground squirrels before, during and after construction of the SVT and Centennial Park addition, including Sangamon County, the Springfield Park District, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Friends of the Sangamon Valley and the University of Illinois Springfield.

*Now we need your help.*



**Seeding Legend**

-  MANICURED LAWN SEED MIX
-  LOW-PROFILE PRAIRIE SEED MIX
-  WET-TO-MESIC PRAIRIE SEED MIX
-  WETLAND PLUGS
-  LAWN SEED REPAIR

**Centennial Park addition:**  
 Shaded areas will be planted with prairie grasses and wildflowers.

gradually became usable. The Illinois DNR has an agreement with the developer to keep the new berm un-mowed. The Springfield Park District and Sangamon County have agreed to limit mowing to the shoulder of the bike trail.

**Q: Why does the planting appear weedy?**

Prairie wildflowers and grasses take time to become established. Plantings often look rough or weedy in the first year or so as plants send down deep roots before sending up wildflowers.

**Q: Why can't the ground squirrels just use the prairie?**

They can and they do. However, the prairie alone probably is not enough. The Franklin's found prior to



construction of the SVT burrowed into the raised railroad bed. Previous attempts to release Franklin's ground squirrels into reconstructed Illinois prairies were not successful. The combination of burrowing habitat and places to forage for food, like the Centennial Park Prairie, seem to be a good combination. Please help us preserve the ground squirrels, and other wildlife using the area.

**Q: Why is the Franklin's ground squirrel rare?**

The Franklin's ground squirrel has declined at the southeast portion of its range, including Illinois and Indiana due to loss of prairie and savanna habitat. Remaining populations become isolated as suitable

places for burrowing and foraging become farther apart.

**Q: Why can't I mow the right of way or berm near my house?**

The ground squirrels will not use mowed areas. Franklin's were found in 2007 along the Wabash Trail. When homeowners began to mow and garden in the right of way after the trail was built, the habitat

*Source: "Response of the Franklin's Ground Squirrel  
to Recreational Trail Development in Springfield,  
Illinois," Masters thesis by Christopher Young,  
University of Illinois Springfield, Dec. 2012.*