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FINEST COOKING
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 CO-OP
NEWS

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Illinois Country Living

APRIL 2026
VOLUME 83, NO. 12

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On the cover: Using his Insta360 camera, Dan Gerard captures a wingover maneuver while paramotoring.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN GERARD





Illinois Country Living is a monthly publication serving the communications needs of the locally owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives of Illinois. With a circulation of more than 200,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

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A time of change and challenge

The cooperative model thrives in moments like these

I TRULY BELIEVE WE'RE working in the most exciting industry in America right now. The decisions we're making aren't small. They will shape the future of electric co-ops in rural America for generations.

This once-in-a-lifetime moment of change is driven by technology, shaped by politics, and influenced by markets. But the real story is about people — the human energy. ... It's in our co-ops. In our leadership. On our boards. Out in the field. Throughout our communities.

That's our edge. We're working for the best people — families, farmers, small business owners, neighbors, friends. Because of them, we hold ourselves to a higher standard. We don't just show up. We stand out.

We seldom stop to connect those two words: "electric" and "co-ops." Combine them, and you find yourself standing shoulder-to-shoulder with people who are called to a higher purpose.

We use the cooperative model to deliver the highest quality service to people at the end of the longest line. If it wasn't for the co-op, farmhouses would still be in the dark. Phones would still be attached to the wall. All labor would be manual. Progress would remain a distant dream.

The cooperative model instructs us to operate with concern for community, but it also challenges us to be enthusiastic and optimistic. To learn, to participate, to share experiences. To give back, even as we keep moving forward.

Today's electric industry is offering us challenges ... to meet growing demand, to adapt to new technology, to build more resilient systems and more reliable service.

That doesn't bother us. We're rising to these challenges, listening to our members, working together and finding solutions. We keep improving. We keep getting better. It's what we were created to do.

The co-op brought electricity. But electricity is also a way to bring the cooperative business model to people. ... We shouldn't take the cooperative model for granted. It's every bit as important as the electric power it provides.

In the beginning, the cooperative model brought people in the community together to do a job no one else would do. That same responsibility rests with us. Your co-op is not just another business.

The bar is higher. The lights are brighter. More is expected of us — more transparency, more member control, more value. We go the extra mile. We listen. We lead. We care. That's the human energy that sets us apart.

Our cooperative business model is uniquely selfless. It's about service to others. We're trusted to make good on the century-old promise of the first people in the community who said — if we commit to this, if we all pitch in, we can turn the lights on here, and we can keep them on.

We have this privilege, written in law, to provide electricity for ourselves — to provide governance for ourselves — to make decisions about the direction we will take ... the best path for our co-ops and communities. 💡



Jim Matheson is the CEO of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. This is an excerpt from his keynote address to the nation's electric cooperatives during NRECA's PowerXchange annual meeting on March 9 in Nashville.



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CELEBRATING OUR LINEWORKERS

Lineworkers are the backbone of our electric cooperative communities, working tirelessly – often in the harshest weather – to keep the lights on across Illinois. Whether restoring power after storms, repairing lines in the middle of the night or maintaining miles of rural infrastructure, their skill, courage and commitment provide families, farms, schools and businesses with safe and dependable electricity. They climb poles, operate heavy equipment and face challenging conditions with pride, putting service above self. We celebrate our lineworkers for their dedication and resilience, and the vital role they play in powering our communities every single day.

Lineworker Appreciation Day

April 13, 2026 (State)

April 18, 2026 (National)



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APRIL CHECKLIST

April is Lawn and Garden Month.



Landscape with purpose.

Planting trees

or tall shrubs on the west and south sides of your home provides natural shade during hot summer months, reducing the need for A/C.

Save water.

Drought-tolerant, native plants require less water and maintenance, or use organic mulch to retain soil moisture.



Plant Christmas trees. Rows

of evergreen shrubs or trees can act as windbreaks.

Call 811. Whether you're planting a garden or installing new fence posts, remember to dial 811 before you dig to get underground utilities marked.



Voices for Cooperative Power

PROTECT AFFORDABLE ENERGY

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Policy priorities for electric cooperatives

American families and businesses count on reliable electricity at a price they can afford. But, with the demand for power continuing to climb and the supply of always-available power sources at risk, smart energy policies are more important than ever.

Your electric cooperative's job goes beyond keeping the lights on day to day. It is also responsible for advocating on behalf of its members in Washington, D.C., to make sure decisions being made at the federal level protect reliable, affordable power in your local community.

In 2026, America's electric cooperatives are focused on a few key issues that directly impact co-op members.

Faster disaster recovery

Electric co-ops support the bipartisan FEMA Act of 2025. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is a critical partner in helping electric co-ops restore power and rebuild their systems in the wake of natural disasters, but it could be more effective and responsive to the needs of rural America. If the FEMA Act passes, it will help utilities restore power more quickly after storms and disasters — while keeping costs lower for rural families and businesses.

Cutting through red tape

Outdated and overly complex permitting rules slow down essential upgrades to power lines and substations. Streamlining these processes helps co-ops keep up with growing demand and improve reliability. Congress must pass comprehensive permitting reforms, including the SPEED Act and PERMIT Act, both of which cleared the House in December.

Keeping reliable power plants online

Co-ops advocate for realistic energy regulations that don't force dependable power plants to shut down before reliable replacements are ready. Mandating emissions limits based on unavailable technology would force critical power plants off the grid and restrict the operation of new natural gas plants.

Smarter land management policies

Co-ops advocate for smarter land-management policies like the Fix Our Forests Act that would allow co-ops to better maintain power lines on public lands and mitigate wildfire risk.

Maintaining funding for grid investments

Federal loan and grant programs help co-ops strengthen the grid, prepare for extreme

Continued on page 8

Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

7			2		6	9		
					9	4		
		8	7	4			5	
						5		3
4	5		9		2		7	6
2		3						
	9			6	7	3		
		4	5					
		7	3		1			8

ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE



It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! Answers are on page 33.

- Shermer High School library was the fictional setting for what popular 1985 movie filmed in Des Plaines, Ill.?
 - Weird Science
 - Breakfast Club
 - Sixteen Candles
- What actor, born in Evanston, Ill., appeared in all five of the following films: Ghostbusters, Tootsie, Stripes, Caddyshack and Meatballs?
 - Dan Aykroyd
 - Harold Ramis
 - Bill Murray
- Lanford, Ill., based on Elgin, Ill., was the fictional working-class town featured in what popular '80s and '90s sitcom?
 - Married... with Children
 - Family Matters
 - Roseanne
- The Blues Brothers, a 1980 musical comedy that took place in Chicago, was originally a recurring sketch on what variety show?
 - Saturday Night Live
 - American Bandstand
 - The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson

Continued from page 7

weather, improve cybersecurity and explore new energy technologies — without shifting costs to members.

Postal rates and reliability

Electric co-ops rely on mail for a variety of important communications, including sending bills to consumer-members and distributing co-op magazines in 42 states. Co-op mail contains critical information for members, such as notices of annual meetings and director elections, information on how to wisely use energy and participate in co-op programs, and planned maintenance that may impact electric service.

While you may not consider it on a daily basis, electricity is essential and underpins nearly every aspect of modern life. Understanding today's evolving energy landscape is important as it shapes how electricity is produced, delivered and consumed.

Advocating on behalf of members is a critical part of the cooperative mission. These policy priorities all come back to the same goal: making sure members have safe, reliable and affordable power — now and in the future.

If you would like to get involved, join Voices for Cooperative Power by visiting aiec.coop/iclvc. Your participation strengthens the collective voice of co-op members throughout Illinois and across the nation. 💡

NRECA

Anderson represents Illinois on Youth Leadership Council

When Micah Anderson first joined the Youth Leadership Council (YLC), he wasn't sure what to expect. A year later, he said representing Illinois has helped him grow as a leader.



"Representing Illinois on the YLC has been an amazing experience," Anderson said while attending the National Rural

Electric Cooperative Association's PowerXchange annual meeting in Nashville March 9-11. "I've learned so much about leadership and networking, and I've really come out of my shell from it. I've met so many new people [who] I would have never connected with before, and it's just been amazing to learn about cooperatives and their values."

It all started in March 2025 when Anderson attended Youth Day in Springfield, sponsored by his co-op, Adams Telephone Co-Operative. He then went on to attend Youth Tour in Washington, D.C., in June. During the trip, he was selected by his peers as the 2025-26 YLC representative for the Illinois delegation. The YLC is a yearlong appointment.

During PowerXchange, Anderson attended breakout sessions focused on both emerging technology and the cooperative business model. But just as meaningful were the connections he made with people throughout the industry.

"My time in Nashville has been short, but it's been so amazing," he said, adding that one of the most memorable parts was getting to know fellow YLC members from across the country. Although he initially felt anxious when they first met during their leadership training in D.C., those concerns quickly disappeared.

"At first I was a little nervous when I came to D.C. for Base Camp, because it's a bunch of people I'd never met," he said. "But as soon as we got together, we clicked instantly. ... Meeting people from Alaska, Hawaii and California — places I've never been — and finding something to connect about is amazing."

Anderson credits much of the opportunity to the co-op that sponsored him throughout his journey, Adams Telephone Co-Operative. "They don't know the impact they've had on my life," he said. "I've learned so much about myself, about my country and about cooperatives in general. I just want to thank them for all they've done and helping me in ways they can't even imagine."

Looking back on the year, Anderson said the experience has changed the way he sees his own potential. "One thing I've learned about myself is that I don't

Continued on page 10

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Where is it?

The winners of the February hidden objects contest were Stephen Wood of SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative and Mary Ann Hutchison of JCE Co-op. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

The shamrock hidden in the March 2026 issue was on page 26 in the home improvement feature. Winners' names will be drawn, and they will be notified. Visit Illinois Country Living on Facebook after each month's deadline for a closeup of the object's location and winners' names.

It's time for a new hidden object search. To celebrate spring, be on the lookout for a ladybug, pictured above. The symbol can vary in size and will not be hidden on this page, a lettered page or in an ad.

Entries must include your name, address, name of your electric co-op (nonmembers are also eligible), and the page number and location of the symbol. Visit icl.coop/hiddenobject and fill out the entry form (also found under Contact Us on the website) or mail a postcard or letter to Illinois Country Living, Hidden Objects, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. We will NOT accept entries via phone call or email.


All entries must be received by the 25th of the publication month. Only one entry is allowed per household every month. If multiple entries per household are submitted, only the first will be considered. Winners' names and the symbol's location will be published in each month's issue of Illinois Country Living. 

Continued from page 8

need to limit what I'm going to do in the future," he said. "I can do anything I put my mind to. I really learned that because of the YLC program."

For students who will attend Youth Tour in 2026, Anderson encourages them to make the most of the opportunity. "Take it all in," he said. "It's a week, and it's a great opportunity. You get to see so much of our capital and meet a bunch of new people."

"And if you are applying for YLC, take it seriously. Reflect on if it's something you really want to do — and if you do, go for it. ... Enjoy the time you have. It may feel like it's going to be a long time, but it goes by insanely fast. Don't limit yourself. Take every opportunity you get."

In just a few short months, Anderson's service as Illinois' 49th YLC will come to an end, when a new YLC is selected during this year's Youth Tour in June. As for what's next, he plans to begin his college education, starting with John Wood Community College and then to Lincoln Land Community College for the cardiovascular sonography program. 

AIEC




Additional mutual aid crews dispatched in wake of Winter Storm Fern

A second round of Illinois electric cooperative crews were dispatched on Feb. 5 to aid co-ops in Mississippi following Winter Storm Fern, just days after many Illinois mutual aid workers returned home from Kentucky recovery efforts. The storm wreaked havoc on electric infrastructure in the southern part of the U.S. toward the end of January.

Crews were sent by SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association and Tri-County Electric Cooperative to Tallahatchie Valley Electric Power Association in Batesville, Miss.

"Thank you doesn't even begin to describe the gratitude we have for our sister cooperatives stepping up to help rebuild our infrastructure," the Mississippi co-op stated on Facebook.

On Feb. 6, additional crews were requested to assist Delta Electric Power Association in Greenwood, Miss. At its peak, the co-op had 21,000 members without service due to storm damage. Adams Electric Cooperative, Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative, Corn Belt Energy, Menard Electric Cooperative, Norris Electric Cooperative, Shelby Electric Cooperative, SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative and Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative were able to send crews to the co-op.

All Illinois crews that responded to requests for mutual aid returned home by Feb. 16. 


AIEC



Last chance to apply for lineworker scholarship

The \$3,000 LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship will help pay for costs to attend the lineworker's school conducted by the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives (AIEC) in conjunction with Lincoln Land Community College (LLCC) in Springfield.

The scholarship is awarded annually to an individual who is related to a rural electric cooperative employee or director in Illinois, is the child of an electric cooperative member in Illinois, is enrolled in the LLCC lineworker's school, or has served or is serving in the U.S. Armed Forces or National Guard. The applicant must have a high school diploma or a GED at the time the scholarship is awarded in July 2026.

Scholarships are awarded based on an essay, a biographical statement, references and a recommendation that will be submitted. The deadline to apply is April 30, 2026. Learn more at aiec.coop/lavern-and-nola-lineworkers-scholarship. 

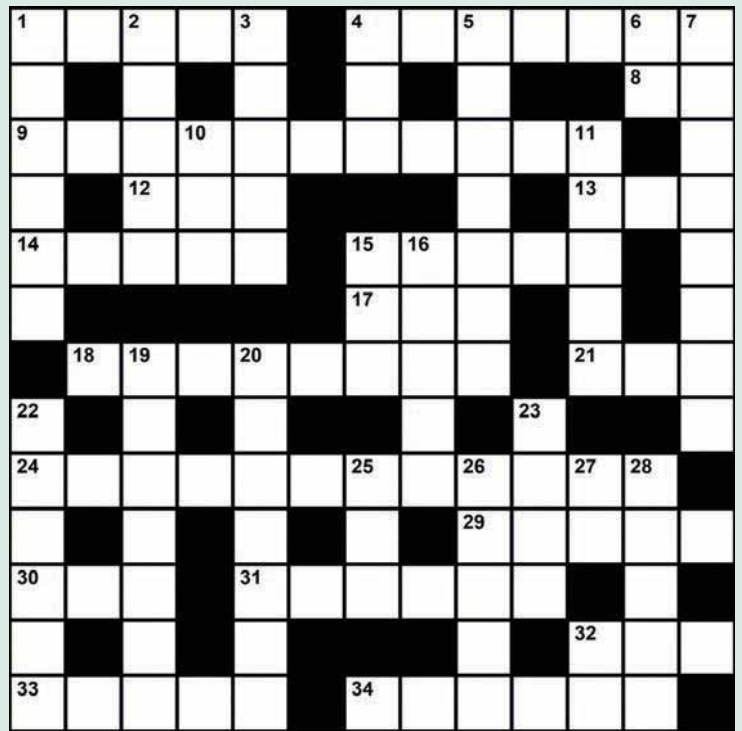
AIEC

Across

- 1 It's celebrated on April 22, ____ Day
 - 4 Spring flowers that are related to rhododendrons
 - 8 Copper symbol
 - 9 Relating to actions that cause the least damage to the environment, 2 words
 - 12 Summit
 - 13 Consume
 - 14 Oxygen and nitrogen, for example
 - 15 Day when tree planting is encouraged, ____ Day
 - 17 Brazilian city
 - 18 Microscopic algae that produce oxygen through photosynthesis
 - 21 ____ Arbor
 - 24 Protection of natural resources
 - 29 Garden tools for gathering leaves
 - 30 Not operating
 - 31 Foliage
 - 32 Mountains, abbr.
 - 33 Periods of calm or quiet
 - 34 Plants that thrive in damp, dark areas
- 11 ____ mate — a form of tea
 - 15 Creative visual works
 - 16 Spanish wine region
 - 19 Deep inhalation
 - 20 Pine tree droppings
 - 22 Large group of fish
 - 23 Slant
 - 25 By way of
 - 26 They are vital to the earth's survival as they consume carbon dioxide and "breathe out" oxygen
 - 27 Approve
 - 28 Birds' homes
 - 32 State that's home to Augusta and Portland, abbr.

Down

- 1 Renewable ____
- 2 Underground plant parts
- 3 Stringed musical instruments
- 4 Rings show a tree's ____
- 5 Society for birds
- 6 Temperature control, abbr.
- 7 Maintains life
- 10 Deforestation is a ____ to planetary survival



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April 25-26 General Grant's Home Front Reenactment and Encampment

GALENA
Watch history come to life

May 1-3 May Play Days

BUSHNELL
Annual carnival with rides, fair food, lemon shake-ups and ribeye sandwiches

May 2-3 Swinging Bridges Art Festival

PONTIAC
Enjoy art, live performances and a Skoolie Swarm

For more information, a complete listing of events or to submit an event, visit icl.coop/datebook.



Shop the Lake Weekend

APRIL
24-25
Shop the Lake is in its second year celebrating boutiques, gift shops, sweet spots and small-town gems around Lake Shelbyville and beyond. Follow the map for a unique shopping experience for home decor to clothing, complete with in-store giveaways and contests, specials, photo-ops and more.

April 24-25, 2026: all day
The Wood Shop and various locations around Lake Shelbyville
● 129 E. Main St., Shelbyville
Admission: free
shelbyvillechamber.com/shop-the-lake or 217-825-4159

Oak Street Art Fair

APRIL
25
The annual Oak Street Art Fair is an all-day celebration of art and music in Murphysboro's historic General John A. Logan neighborhood. Regional artists line the brick streets with works ranging from ceramics and painting to jewelry, photography and mixed media, while local musicians perform free concerts on the Oak Leaf Stage. With structured children's art activities and the nearby General John A. Logan Museum to explore, it's a fun, family-friendly event.

April 25, 2026: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
● Logan Historic Arts Neighborhood, 1515 Oak St., Murphysboro
Admission: free
oakstreetart.com



Sheep to Clothing to Quilts

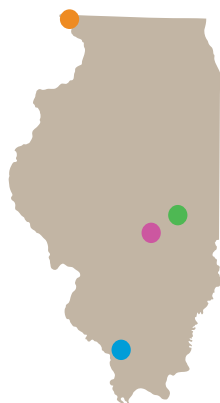
MAY
2
Experience the full journey from sheep to finished textiles at this family-friendly, hands-on heritage event. Watch sheep and alpaca shearing demonstrations, followed by wool washing, dyeing, spinning, weaving and quilting. Visitors can also explore traditional farm skills like chair caning, soap making, rope making and gardening. In the morning, there will be a hearty farmer's breakfast and lunch favorites like grilled lamb kabobs and burgers, plus homemade breads and sweets from a local Amish baker.

May 2, 2026: 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
● Illinois Amish Heritage Center, 284 E. Illinois Route 133, between Arcola and Arthur
Admission: varies
illinoisamish.org

Galena Main Street Sidewalk Sale

MAY
8-10
Mark your calendar for a day of deals along Galena's Historic Main Street. During the shopping event, you can browse through the various sales taking place both on the street and inside the stores. Whether you're looking for new clothes, home decor or a great deal, you're sure to find something.

May 8-10, 2026: 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.
● Main Street, Galena
Admission: free
visitgalena.org/event/galena-main-street-sidewalk-sale/6746





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Tractors to roll down Route 66

Celebrate the **100th anniversary of Route 66** with a one-of-a-kind Tractor Drive on June 20, 2026.

Dozens of tractors – from freshly polished classics to hardworking machines with decades of history – will roll out at **9:30 a.m. from the Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center** in Litchfield. The 35-mile drive will travel three historic alignments of the Mother Road.



Hosted by the **Mid-State Collectors Club**, the event welcomes **all brands of tractors**.

Registration fee is \$10.

Bring your tractor – or come watch history roll by.

To learn more, contact Jim Niemann at 217-324-5574 or Keith Ladage at 217-971-5917.



Up, up and away

Kite flying safety starts on the ground

AS A YOUNG BOY, I tried and failed several times to fly a kite. While not rocket science, it was something I just couldn't figure out how to do. More often than not, I'd take off in a sprint with the kite lagging behind and bouncing on the ground.

One day, my intuition told me that it was perfect kite-flying weather, so I grabbed my superhero kite (I don't remember which one), and I headed out to the field next to my house, with my older sister in tow.

To my surprise, the kite was immediately grabbed by the wind and soared high into the air. I was delighted for all of three seconds. I was not prepared for the strength of the wind, and the kite was ripped right from my hands.

My sister, who at that moment was dancing around the field a little farther away, was unaware of my plight. I watched the kite fly higher and higher into the sky — and then it started

coming down right toward her. I yelled at her, "Grab it! Grab it!"

She looked at me with arms outstretched, as if asking, "Grab what?" And that's when the kite handle bonked her right on top of the head. She hit the ground as if the sky was falling and, needless to say, did not grab it. My kite caught another gust of wind and flew up and out of my life forever.

I have not successfully flown a kite since then. Have I tried? Well, I plead the Fifth. But, if I were to try again, I would heed the advice of the experts at SafeElectricity.org.


Kites and other toys like model airplanes or drones are perfectly safe. It is just best they be flown far away from overhead powerlines. Instead, choose large, open areas like a park or a field — and there are many from which to choose in Illinois.

If toys get stuck in a power line or even a substation, never try to

retrieve them. Leave that to the professionals. The electric co-op or utility should be contacted for assistance.

Additionally, check the weather ahead of time. Never fly kites or other toys when a thunderstorm may be approaching. Lightning can strike up to 10 miles away from a storm, even when it's not raining.

The rule of thumb when it comes to weather safety is, if you hear thunder or see lightning, go indoors. This must be a fully enclosed building — not a porch or an open shed. And certainly do not take cover under a tree. If no building is available, find a hard-topped vehicle with the windows up. Then, wait at least 30 minutes after the last sound of thunder before going back outside.

For more information about electrical safety, talk to your local electric cooperative or go to SafeElectricity.org. 



Colten Bradford is the editor of Illinois Country Living magazine.

Seniors get new medical alert device

Instantly connects to free unlimited nationwide help with just the push of a button with no contracts, no deposits, and no monthly bills



■ **NO MONTHLY BILLS:** “My wife had an old style help button that came with hefty bills every month and she was embarrassed to wear it because it made her look old,” said Frank McDonald, Canton, Ohio. “Now, we both have FastHelp™, the sleek new medical alert device that our grandkids say makes us look ‘cool’ not old,” he said. With FastHelp, seniors never have to worry about being alone and the best part is there are no monthly bills ever.

■ **FLYING OUT THE DOOR:** Trucks are being loaded with the new medical alert devices called FastHelp. They are now being delivered to lucky seniors who call the National Rebate Center Hotline at 1-800-209-4926 DEPT. FSTH141 today. Everyone is calling to get FastHelp, the sleek new medical alert device because it instantly connects you to unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available.

■ **SENIORS SNAP UP NEW MEDICAL ALERT DEVICE:** Instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever. Nothing to hook up. You don’t need a land line or cell phone. It’s ready to use right out of the box. Comes with new cellular embedded technology that works at home or anywhere you go so you are never alone.

Seniors born before 1964 get new medical alert device

**Nationwide:
Demand for new Medical Alert Device soars**

The phone lines are ringing off the hook.

That’s because for seniors born before 1964, it’s a deal too good to pass up.

Starting at precisely 8:30am today the Pre-Store Release begins for the sleek new medical alert device that comes with the exclusive FastHelp™ One-Touch 911 Button that instantly connects you to unlimited nationwide help everywhere with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever.

“It’s not like old style help buttons that make you talk to a call center, only work when you’re at home and come with hefty bills every month. FastHelp comes with state-of-the-art cellular embedded technology. That means it works at home or anywhere and everywhere cell service is available whether you’re out watering the garden, driving in a car, at church or even hundreds of miles away on a tour or at a casino. You are never alone. With just a single push of the One-Touch E Button you instantly get connected to free unlimited help nationwide with no monthly bills ever,” said Jack Lawrence, Executive Director of Product Development for U.S. based Universal Physicians.

“We’ve never seen anything like it. Consumers absolutely love the sleek new modern design and most of all, today’s instant rebate practically pays for it and no monthly bills ever,” Lawrence said.

FastHelp is the sleek new medical alert device with the best of combinations: a quality, high-tech engineered device that’s also an extremely great value because there are no monthly bills ever. ■

▶ HOW TO GET IT

▶ BORN BEFORE 1964:

Use the rebate coupon below and call this Toll-Free Hotline: 1-800-209-4926 EXT. FSTH141

▶ BORN AFTER 1964:

You cannot use the rebate coupon below and must pay \$299 Call: 1-800-209-6405 EXT. FSTH141

▶ REBATE COUPON

VALID FOR USE

21 DAYS ONLY

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Amount of Rebate (AOR) **1P**

\$150.00 OFF

2Y

RE: FSTH141
DLVY: ML2077R-1

1 OF 1

BOTTOM LINE: You don’t need to shop around. We’ve done all the leg work, this deal is too good to pass up. With the instant FastHelp rebate, it is a real steal at just \$149 and shipping. There are no monthly bills ever.

PROS: It’s the sleek new medical alert device that comes with the exclusive FastHelp One-Touch 911 Button that instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help with no contracts or deposits. It connects you to the vast available network of cellular towers for free and saves seniors a ton of money because there are no monthly bills ever making this deal a must have. Plus it’s the only medical alert device that makes seniors look important, not old.

CONS: Consumers can’t get FastHelp in stores until later this year. That’s why it’s so important for seniors born before 1964 to call the National Rebate Center Hotline within the next 21 days. For those who miss that deadline, the sleek little medical alert device will set you back over \$300 bucks.

— Five Star Customer Reviews —

Hurricane Help
“We had two hurricanes recently. I had no electricity for 6 days. I fell, so I pushed the button, and they came right out and picked me up off the floor. I tell many of my friends they need to get FastHelp!” - Virginia, FL

LIFESAVER
“When I got my FastHelp I never thought I’d have to use it, but when I fell and broke my hip it saved my life.” - Harold, OH

Very appreciative of having FastHelp
“I did have an emergency. Help RESPONDED quickly and came in a few minutes.” - Irving, PA

WE LOVE THE PRODUCT
“We bought it outright with no bills ever.” - Rosemary, NY

Safe anywhere
“This little FastHelp device is my guardian angel. I’m so glad my daughter-in-law got it for me.” - Pete, FL

A+ Rating: These are unsolicited consumer feedback from satisfied customers as reported to Universal Physicians.

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Grow your savings

Landscaping that cuts energy costs

WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK about saving energy, they picture insulation upgrades, efficient windows and appliance swaps. But your yard can play a major role, too. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, a well-planned landscape can reduce air conditioning costs by up to 25% and pay for itself in less than eight years.

On the south side, tall trees planted at a distance equal to two to five times their mature height can shade your home without blocking winter sun. On the west side, shorter trees and shrubs help shield against intense, low-angle afternoon sun.

Utilize shade trees over patios and driveways to reduce reflected heat.

to the south of your home if you plan on using sunshine to help heat your home. A good rule is to plant your trees at a distance of two to five times the tree's mature height. If snowdrifts are a problem, plant shrubs on the windward side of your windbreak to help trap snow.

Summer shading

The biggest consideration in summer landscaping is shading your home from the heat. To the south of your home, plant tall trees to provide shade. If you plant these trees far enough away (two to five times the length of a grown tree), you will still be able to allow sunshine to warm your home in the winter.

To the west of your home, shorter trees and shrubs will provide protection from afternoon sun rays, which fall at shorter angles. Bushes around the perimeter of your home provide shade and absorb the sun's rays. Avoid dense plants in areas where humidity is a problem. Air needs to be allowed to flow freely to keep the soil from becoming oversaturated.

Plan for a tree's mature height

Avoid planting trees that will grow taller than 15 feet near power lines. For taller species, plant at least 20 feet away — 45 feet is even better — to prevent safety hazards and avoid future pruning.

Call before you dig

Before you plant anything, call 811 to check for underground utilities. This free service marks public lines, like electricity, water and gas, so you avoid costly and dangerous mistakes. Call several business days before you plan to dig. Visit SafeElectricity.org for more tips on energy safety and efficiency. 💡



Choose the right trees

Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves in the winter) block sunlight in the summer and allow light in during the colder months, helping to regulate indoor temperatures year-round.

Evergreen trees provide consistent shade and can serve as windbreaks, which is especially helpful in cool climates.

Placement matters

On west and northwest sides of your home, plant trees to block strong mid- to late-afternoon sun. By east and west windows, plant deciduous trees to block the summer sun but still allow the winter sun to heat your home.

Along the home's perimeter, bushes can absorb sunlight and reduce heat transfer, but avoid dense plantings in humid climates, where airflow is important to prevent excess moisture.

If you have solar panels, avoid planting tall trees on the south side of panels to prevent shade during peak sun hours.

Winter windbreaks

The biggest consideration in landscaping to increase winter efficiency is creating windbreaks to stop wind chills from having as much of an effect on the temperature around your home.

Dense trees, such as evergreens and shrubs, make the best windbreaks. Do not plant trees too close



Erin Hollinshead is the executive director of Safe Electricity, a program creating a safer, smarter world by providing lifesaving electrical safety education.

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Collectors LOVE “firsts” as no collection is complete without the very first coin. First-year coins are almost always the most coveted coins and the 1964 First Year Silver Kennedy Half Dollar is no exception, especially when you consider the coin has been struck for over 60 years! But there’s something else that makes the First-Year 1964 Kennedy Half Dollar hoarded by all.

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When you buy one brand of equipment with the same battery type, you can easily swap batteries between different pieces of equipment.

The cutting edge

Electrify your lawn care

ELECTRIC LAWN EQUIPMENT HAS seen drastic improvements in cost, motor efficiency and battery power in recent years. From hedge and string trimmers to leaf blowers, chainsaws, and push and riding mowers, there are lots of options for electric lawn equipment.

Electric equipment is quieter than its gas-powered counterparts and typically needs less maintenance. There's no more mixing fuel, changing spark plugs or worrying about gas going bad over the winter. Advances in rechargeable battery technology eliminate having to lug around a heavy extension cord to get your work done. Just pop in a battery and go.

Most popular lawn equipment brands offer battery-powered options, along with newer brands that specialize in electric tools. If you need multiple tools, buying the same brand with one battery type allows you to swap batteries between different pieces of equipment. That

also means fewer battery chargers to store or keep on the workbench.

Opt for equipment with brushless motors. They are more efficient, more powerful and have a longer lifespan than traditional brushed motors. A brushless motor typically costs more but is worth the improved efficiency. A brushed motor transfers electricity using physical brushes, which can wear down over time. The friction caused by the brushes makes equipment run hotter and noisier. A brushless motor uses electronic commutation with less friction, which makes it more powerful, extends the lifespan and allows you to get more done on a single charge.

Just as gas-powered lawnmowers require safe storage and handling of gas and oil, battery-powered equipment requires proper care for maintenance, charging and disposal. Always use the manufacturer's original charging equipment, charge

batteries on hard surfaces away from anything flammable, and store chargers in a cool, dry place.

Most manufacturers recommend charging batteries only until they reach full capacity instead of leaving them on the charger until you are ready to use them. This helps prevent damage to the battery from overcharging and heat buildup and reduces potential fire hazards. Unplug chargers when not in use to avoid energy waste.

Similar to gas and oil, old or damaged batteries should not end up in household garbage and landfills, where they can ignite fires and leak toxic chemicals into soil and groundwater. Instead, recycle them at a big-box store or at a county or city waste management site.

If you're looking for a quieter, more efficient, lower maintenance lawn care routine, rethink your equipment options and consider electric models. 💡



Miranda Boutelle is the director of operations and customer engagement at Efficiency Services Group in Oregon, a cooperatively owned energy efficiency company.

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An aerial, bird's-eye view of a large white wind turbine in a vast green field. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting sunset or sunrise. The turbine's three blades extend across the frame, and the ground below is a patchwork of green fields with some roads and smaller structures in the distance.

ON CLOUD NINE

The freedom of paramotoring

By Colten Bradford

AEC's Dan Gerard enjoys a bird's-eye view.



FLYING ABOUT 300 FEET off the ground, Dan Gerard took in a view of Illinois that not many people get to experience. Feet dangling into open air from his seat with a propeller strapped to his back, he thought he was alone — until he looked to the right and realized a bald eagle was gliding along with him.

He says that was one of the coolest experiences he's had while enjoying his latest unconventional hobby — paramotoring. "Being able to fly at high altitudes and see the countryside and just take it all in, it's just an escape for me," Gerard adds.

He isn't alone. Paramotoring is taking off among thrill seekers as it grows in popularity. The sport is a close cousin of paragliding, a motorless free flight utilizing elevation (like a slope or hill) and thermals (rising warm air) to get off the ground. Since a change in

elevation is in short supply in Illinois, a small engine and propeller are necessary for pilots like Gerard to lift off.

"Paramotoring is typically more common in flatter states, where we don't have mountains to run and jump off of," Gerard explains. "In Illinois, we're pretty fortunate where there's just so much open land and you can just go and have fun."

While paragliding often requires midday, thermic conditions, which can be turbulent, paramotor pilots aim for calmer air in early morning or the evening. "We typically fly during the two hours after sunrise, two hours before sunset," he says. "We get to enjoy the nice, smooth, clean, fun air."

At first glance, it may look impossible — and maybe a little awkward — for a paramotorist to get off the ground. The colorful wing is laid neatly on the ground, the pilot straps on the motor and propeller, and finally the pilot turns on the motor and starts running until their feet leave the ground.

"There's something different about your feet just kind of dangling in the air and flying 700 feet off the ground."

"You are literally running into the sky," he explains. Gerard, who is the chief technology officer at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives, began his paramotoring journey with a YouTube video.

"I watched a video of a guy flying to McDonald's," he recalls. "That was about five years ago, and I knew as soon as I saw it that I had to try it."

Part of the appeal is accessibility. Paramotoring doesn't require a traditional pilot's license, and the cost of entry is relatively low compared to other forms of aviation.

"The barrier of entry to get into aviation was relatively low with this type of sport," he says, adding that self-teaching is technically allowed, but training is strongly recommended. "Get training. This is not something that you should try and accomplish on your own. You don't

know what you don't know, and it is aviation. You are taking your life into your hands."

Gerard attended a flight school and earned certification through the United States Powered Paragliding Association. His first taste of flight came without a motor.

"They tow you up to probably about 300 feet, and then they cut the rope, and you float down," he says. "That was my first experience with flight."

Eventually came the moment every student waits for — the first solo flight. "I remember getting about 60 or 80 feet off the ground, thinking, 'Okay, now I'm in the air, and now I have to get back down somehow,'" Gerard laughs.

During that first flight, he remembers his instructor sensed his unease over the radio and said, "I need you to stop, breathe, and just take everything in for a few minutes."

Once he relaxed, the experience changed completely. "It was indescribable," Gerard recalls.

"There's something different about your feet just kind of dangling in the air and flying 700 feet off the ground."

For new pilots, the mental challenge can be just as intense as the physical one. "I think the hardest

thing to do is trust your gear, because you're literally just hanging by a few strings and a harness," he says.

Flights depend heavily on weather, especially wind. Ideal conditions are gentle. And while flight is more common in warmer months, Gerard has flown in Illinois every month of the year.

"The ideal wind conditions would be between 3 and 8 miles per hour," he says. "We really don't want to see the gusts go above 10 or 12 miles an hour."

Before every flight, he checks multiple weather apps and reviews conditions not just at ground level, but at altitude as



well. In the air, most pilots rely on a tracking app. “It records our complete flight path, our speed, our altitude,” he says. “It gives us notifications if there’s manned aircraft in our vicinity.”

Altitude itself is a tradeoff. According to Gerard, flying higher gives pilots more time to react if something goes wrong. So, the higher the altitude, the safer you are. Despite that, he enjoys lower altitude flights the most.

“I have the most fun flying a couple feet off the ground, cruising over the countryside and hopping over trees,” Gerard says.

That low flying comes with responsibility. Power lines, in particular, demand attention. “Power lines can actually be really hard to see, early morning, late evening,” he warns. “You really have to look for the poles.”

Paramotoring has multiple safety layers, including a reserve parachute. “The biggest safety feature that we have is our reserve,” he explains. “If something goes wrong, I can always reach down and deploy that reserve.”

From startling deer to seeing kids pointing and waving, flying never gets old to Gerard. “It’s definitely peaceful. It’s very calming,” he says. “It’s surreal that we can even do this sport.”

Oftentimes, he will bring along a few toy paratroopers on his flights to toss to any kids he spots below. “If I see kids out in the yard, I’ll usually try to

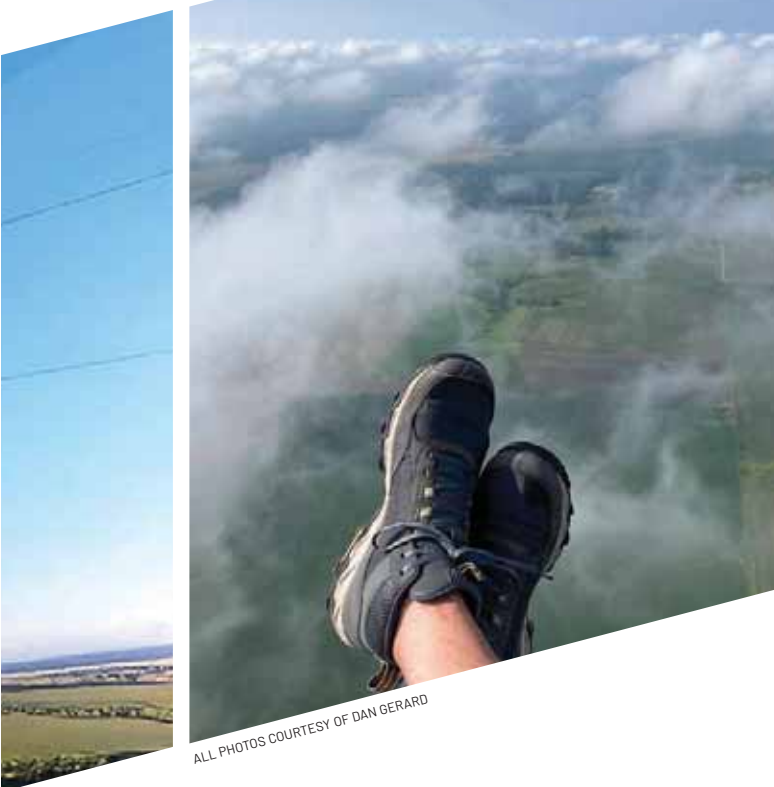
fly by and drop some parachute guys for the kids,” he says. “The kids always seem to love that.”

While paramotoring isn’t a mainstream sport (although there are professional competitions), it has a dedicated following. “It’s not a huge community, but there is a community,” he says. Pilots gather at fly-ins across the country, including events in Illinois. For newcomers curious about the sport, many qualified instructors offer tandem flights.

For those interested, there are several fly-in events in Illinois. Airborne Adventure of Illinois, a paramotor training school located at Percival Springs Airport and Campground in Watson (outside of Effingham), hosts multiple events throughout the year. The KornBuzzard Fly-In is scheduled for June 11-14 in Palmyra at Zelmer Memorial Airpark.

Gerard has a flying bucket list that keeps growing. His priority right now is flying a coastline, and he has dreams to someday fly over the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt.

“If you’ve ever had the dream as a kid [where] you run around with your arms out and wish you could fly, it’s pretty much living that dream,” he says. 🍷



“It’s definitely peaceful. It’s very calming. It’s surreal that we can even do this sport.”

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAN GERARD



Only in Olney

The Illinois town that's nutty about white squirrels

By Nick Thomas

ACCORDING TO THE NATIONAL Day Calendar website, an online database listing fun and quirky unofficial “national days,” Jan. 21 is Squirrel Appreciation Day. In the town of Olney, however, the scampering rodents are appreciated every day — especially its colony of rare white squirrels.

The hyperactive, pale-furred critters can be spotted in various locations such as the Olney City Park off Route 130, where they are most active in the early mornings and late afternoons. Just how the white, bushy-tailed rodents arrived in Olney is a well-known local story.

“It goes back over 100 years,” says Olney Mayor Mark Lambird. “The first pair of white squirrels was brought to a general store in town, and people paid a few cents to look at them.

Later they were turned loose and were able to colonize the area, so the numbers began to multiply over the years.”

In the early 1940s, that number stood at around 800, but the most recent count toward the end of 2025 estimates just around 60. Although Olney residents and city officials have embraced their white squirrel population, including city ordinances aimed at stopping dogs and cats from running at-large, giving the squirrels the right of way on streets, and making it illegal to harm them, nature doesn’t work in the pale squirrel’s favor.

Dr. John Stencel, an Arizona-based biologist who lived in Olney for 37 years and taught at Olney Central College, believes the white squirrels’ days may be numbered unless steps to

protect them are continued. “Gray squirrels blend into the background, but the white squirrels are a much easier target for predators,” he says.

Whereas gray squirrels on a dark tree trunk are almost invisible from even a short distance, their white relatives are easily spotted from much farther away. From the air, owls and hawks snatch them up, especially any babies, and the rising population of hungry feral cats over the years has slashed their numbers. Even unrestrained domestic cats chase after them.

Found across the animal kingdom, albinism is an inherited genetic condition that causes a significant reduction in pigmentation of the skin, hair and eyes. Although the Olney colony exhibits white fur, the blue tint in their irises indicates they are not strictly 100% albino, which typically presents with pink or red eyes due to the absent pigment.

“There are degrees of albinism,” notes Stencil. “While it may be incomplete in the Olney squirrels, I still consider them to be pretty much albino.”

The absence of eye pigmentation also results in poorer vision, particularly in bright sunlight, making white squirrels generally more timid than brown-eyed gray squirrels with sharper eyesight.

Although the two groups largely coexist peacefully, Stencil has observed that gray squirrels tend to be more assertive during feeding, sometimes chasing off the more cautious white squirrels, at least temporarily. Despite this, the populations do interbreed, and gray squirrels with white tails are occasionally seen.

To keep track of the population, an informal annual Olney squirrel count was introduced in the 1970s and continues to this day on the first three Saturdays of each October. Volunteers come from all over the state and beyond, with the yearly counts clearly indicating the numbers have been declining.

Despite this, the white squirrels have unified the town through the years. They’ve been designated the town mascot and contribute to its economy when visitors stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, and buy from town merchants.

The local fondness for the animals is obvious after just a short drive through downtown. White squirrel figures are featured in many murals around town, some being obvious while others are more subtle.

Their images can be seen on city vehicles, including police cars, displayed on city banners and shop windows — they even have a road named after them. When the 2024 solar eclipse brought visitors to town, one merchant sold

eclipse mugs celebrating the celestial event and also managed to squeeze a white squirrel into the mug’s decorative image.

Local stores, like the White Squirrel Shoppe on Olney’s Main Street, sell white squirrel figurines, books, Christmas ornaments, apparel, cookies, candles and much more.

“Almost everything we sell is related to white squirrels, much of it handmade ourselves, but if we can’t we’ll do private commissions,” says store owner Cindy Totten, who

wants visitors to leave Olney with a white squirrel story they’ll be excited to share. “Everyone who comes in receives free peanuts — for the squirrels — along with a map directing them to areas where sightings are most likely.”

White squirrels also adorn local government buildings, including the Chamber of Commerce and City Hall, as well as the local public library, all of which contributed to the town being featured in national news coverage over the years.

“Even British naturalist David Attenborough mentioned the white squirrels of Olney in one of his nature documentaries many years ago,” says Lambird. “Near and far, we are proud to be known for our white squirrels.” 🐿️



Olney's fondness for the white squirrel can be seen on local government buildings (top) and in the mural and statue in Bower Park (bottom).

The sweeter the fruit

Flamm Orchards' deep roots

By Mary Blye Kramer



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FLAMM ORCHARDS

STRAWBERRY SEASON IS APPROACHING, and cars will soon fill the parking lot of Flamm Orchards as customers arrive to get their fill of fresh fruit. Many may also pick up a jar of jam, made fresh in the on-site bakery, a bottle of smoky, Amish-crafted salsa, or a bag of fresh vegetables, also grown at Flamm.

Adjacent to the store lies the Fruits and Cream Stand, where people will line up to buy fresh cobbler, donuts, sundaes or a Razzle — soft-serve ice cream with chunks of fresh fruit. Many of the treats served at the stand come from recipes handed down by Judy Flamm, a fourth-generation Flamm by marriage.

Austin Flamm, one of the current owners and a member of Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative, remembers sitting at the table as a child while his Grandma Judy served four different types of peach cobbler or apple dumplings.

Everyone's favorites became the desserts she regularly served the family, and later, customers at the Fruits and Cream Stand. Her assistant, nicknamed Chela, learned alongside Judy at the stand, and when Judy passed away in 2024, Chela took over baking the original recipes.

The Flamms have been growing fruit there since Austin's great-great-great grandfather purchased 117 acres in 1888. For many years, Flamm was solely a commercial farm, because, as Austin explains, farm stands stood on every corner and there just wasn't a need for another one. By the 1980s, however, that was no longer the situation.

As farms fell by the wayside, people began to stop by Flamm Orchards requesting cases of their fruit. Thus, the farm stand was born, serving two purposes: to supply the

community with fruit and to allow the owners and staff to work the commercial side uninterrupted.

When reflecting on the success of Flamm Orchards, Austin gives the topography of southern Illinois a lot of credit — the rolling hills with valleys in between create the perfect situation for fruit-growing.

For example, Flamm's 300-acre peach orchard sits at 800 feet in elevation. In the spring, when frost is still possible, it's critical that the newly blooming peach buds are protected. Because cold temperatures settle, the valleys create natural protection for the trees.

Austin says cultural practices handed down through the generations, along with innovative techniques, also contribute to the orchard's success. The amount of time spent pruning, the type and method of fertilizing, attention to detail, and the willingness to do whatever it takes to grow top-notch produce are all important aspects.

"Eighty employees will walk through the orchards with pruning shears making little cuts," says Austin. "It's expensive and it may seem unnecessary, but the end result is better peaches."

Few years go by without Flamm Orchards experimenting with something new. Several years ago, they introduced handmade strawberry donuts, and early this year, the family began tossing around ideas for blackberry jams and a blackberry cobbler or dumplings, as this is their first year growing blackberries.

However, the apple dumplings, strawberry shortcake, zucchini bread, peach cobbler and donuts — all the long-time favorites — are all still available, and will be for generations to come, according to its current fifth- and sixth-generation owners. 📍



SHOW SUPPORT

Small business owners can request to be featured in the Support Local section of Illinois Country Living magazine by submitting the form at icl.coop/local.

Flamm Orchards

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A TOUR WORTH SAVORING

Galena Foodie Adventures offers a taste of the town



By Peggy Francomb

HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE MAY draw visitors to Galena's historic downtown, but it's the aromas and flavors that make you linger. Galena Foodie Adventures takes you on specialized tours that pair thoughtfully chosen tastings with stories from a local guide, turning a walk down Main Street into a shared culinary experience.

At the heart of it all is a passion for food and travel. Founded in 2023 by Devin Ganka, the two-hour-plus walking tour includes five savory and sweet stops, each carefully selected to make the visit memorable.

"It's a great way to experience downtown in a different way. I always tell people they are literally tasting their way through our Main Street," says Ganka, adding that the tours often help visitors try new places and foods.

Ganka, an Iowa native and JCE Co-op member, grew up taking family trips to Galena and has a culinary background. He was working as a traveling general manager for a coffee chain when he decided to start his own business.

"As much as I love food, I've always loved to travel," he says. "I stumbled across food tours on my own travels and fell in love with the concept. I thought, 'Galena's food scene is growing; it's exciting. There's nothing really to showcase that ... so I'll start it.'"

While the tours touch on some Galena history, Ganka takes pride in focusing on the food and the stories of the people behind it.

In its fourth season, Galena Foodie Adventures now has four types of tours. The original Galena Downtown Food and Drink Tour remains the most popular. It features five stops and nine tastings, with no reservations to worry about, no waiting in line, and food costs and gratuities all included in the ticket price.

The tour starts at The Galena Bakehouse with a full-size empanada and seasonal beverage. Across the street, Galena River Wine and Cheese pairs a grilled cheese with three to six liqueur and wine samples. Next up is Root Beer Revelry for an amazing root



beer float featuring their own Drifless or Fever River root beers, giving guests a taste of local flavor.

Premiering on the tour this season is one of the newer additions to Galena's culinary scene, Caliza Mediterranean Cuisine. Here, foodies will sample the ham croquettes and a delightful sparkling sangria, Tinto de Verano. Rounding out the tour is the Galena Taphouse and a featured sampling that changes seasonally, Thai donuts and a draft beer.

Galena Foodie Adventures has grown since its start, with about 300 tours planned for this season. Offerings include the original downtown food and drink tour, a cocktail adventure tour, ugly sweater food tours with exclusive holiday-themed tastings, and a honey and mead tasting tour in partnership with Dry Creek Beekeeping, a nearby apiary.

Ganka works closely with all the tour's business partners, keeping in touch weekly and sampling everything. "I'm not going to put something on the tour I don't like," he noted. "That's how the locations were picked at the beginning. [They were] my favorite places, and I wanted to share that with the world."

Including food tour partners, Galena Foodie Adventures works with 17 Galena businesses through cross-bookings, lodging packages and promotional partnerships that add value and support other local businesses.

Giving back is important to Ganka. In addition to supporting community events and organizations, starting in 2026, \$2 from every ticket sold will be donated to the Iowa Donor Network in honor of his father, who passed away in 2014. 📍

LET'S EAT!

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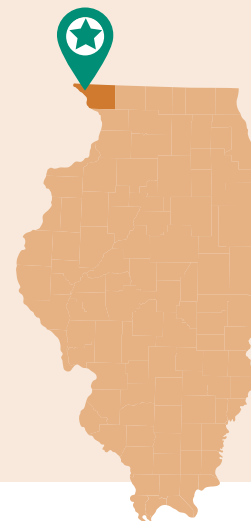
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Use your noodle

THERE'S SOMETHING UNIQUELY COMFORTING about noodles. Recipes come from a diverse array of cultures, much as the variety of shapes and sizes of the noodles themselves. Whether it's tender egg noodles swimming in sauce, creamy mac and cheese, or a simple pasta salad, these pantry staples have you coming back for seconds — sometimes thirds. They're easy to make and almost always hit the spot. 🍴

WE NEED RECIPES!

Recipes using brown sugar
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Please email recipe submissions or questions to finestcooking@icl.coop or mail them to Finest Cooking c/o Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. Please include your name, address, phone number (for questions), and the name of your electric cooperative. Additional recipes can be found on our website at finestcooking.com.



Recipes are prepared, tasted and photographed by **Colten Bradford**, Illinois Country Living editor.



Easy Goulash

Submitted by *Joan D. Teal, Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative*
Servings: 4

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 box mac and cheese, dry mix | 1/2 teaspoon oregano |
| 1 pound ground beef | 1 teaspoon sugar, optional |
| 1/4 cup onions, diced | 1 14-ounce can diced tomatoes |

Cook macaroni noodles according to the package directions. Drain when fully cooked. While the macaroni is cooking, brown the ground beef and add the chopped onion. Cook until onion is tender. Drain well. Add beef and onion back to the skillet and turn on low. Add oregano, sugar and tomatoes. Simmer on low for 5 minutes. When macaroni is done, drain and then add to the beef mixture. Simmer for 2 minutes. Add the cheese pouch from the box. Stir well. If more moisture is needed, add some pasta water. Turn off the heat, and enjoy with a salad and some garlic bread.

Baked Spaghetti

Submitted by *Jenny Smith, Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative*
Servings: 12

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 cup onion, chopped | 12 ounces angel hair spaghetti, cooked and drained |
| 1 cup green pepper, chopped | 2 cups finely shredded mild cheddar cheese |
| 1 tablespoon butter | 1 10-ounce can condensed cream of mushroom soup, undiluted |
| 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes | 1/4 cup water |
| 1 4-ounce can sliced mushrooms, drained | 1/4 cup grated parmesan cheese |
| 1 2-ounce can sliced ripe olives, drained | |
| 2 teaspoons dried oregano | |

Preheat oven to 350 F. In a large skillet, saute onion and green pepper in butter until tender. Add tomatoes, mushrooms, olives and oregano. Simmer uncovered for 10 minutes. Place half of the spaghetti in a greased 9X13-inch baking dish. Top with half the vegetable mixture. Sprinkle with 1 cup cheddar cheese. Repeat layers. Mix the soup and water until smooth and pour over casserole. Spread evenly. Sprinkle with parmesan cheese. Bake, uncovered, for 30-35 minutes or until heated through.

Chicken Bacon Ranch Pasta

Submitted by Sherry Reuter, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association
Servings: 6

- 1 pound penne pasta
- 6 strips bacon, diced
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 packet ranch seasoning mix
- 2 cups milk
- 1 tablespoon butter
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 2 boneless skinless chicken breasts, cut into pieces
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese

Cook pasta, drain it, and set it aside. Cook bacon and drain the grease, keeping a tablespoon of bacon drippings in the pan. Add a tablespoon of butter to the bacon drippings, toss in chicken breast pieces and brown, about 4 to 5 minutes on each side until cooked through. Pour the ranch dressing mix and flour over the chicken, then add the milk. Stir until it is bubbly and thick. Add the cheese and half of the diced bacon pieces to the pan. Stir until cheese is melted, combine the sauce and pasta together, add salt and pepper to taste. Top dish with the remaining bacon pieces.



Chicken Noodle Toss

Submitted by Denise Smith, Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative
Servings: 4

- 2 chicken breasts, sliced
- Mrs. Dash seasoning, to taste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 12-ounce bag frozen broccoli and cauliflower
- 6 ounces wide egg noodles
- 1 packet Good Seasons Roasted Garlic Dressing, prepared as directed on package
- Croutons, optional

Season chicken strips with Mrs. Dash. Heat large skillet over medium heat. Add olive oil. Once heated, saute chicken until cooked through. In a large pot of boiling water, cook noodles to al dente. Add broccoli and cauliflower to noodles the last 4-5 minutes. Drain. Add to chicken in skillet. Drizzle with Good Seasons dressing and toss to coat. Heat through. Top with croutons, if desired. **Editor's note:** Substitute the dressing mix with 1 cup of a prepared vinaigrette dressing, such as garlic and basil or Italian.



Awesome Summer Pasta Salad

Submitted by Carol Sue Carnes, Illinois Electric Cooperative
Servings: 8

- 1 16-ounce box mostaccioli, bowtie or rotini pasta
- 1 small red onion, chopped
- 1 medium cucumber, chopped into bite-sized pieces
- 1 small red pepper, diced
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon prepared mustard
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped (or 3/4 teaspoon dried)
- 1 large tomato, chopped
- 1/4 cup sliced black olives

Cook pasta according to package directions. Drain and stir in onion, cucumber and red pepper. While pasta is cooking, prepare the salad dressing so it has time to cool before adding it to pasta. In a medium saucepan, cook sugar and vinegar over medium heat until sugar dissolves. Let cool completely. Then add oil, mustard, salt, garlic powder and parsley. Pour cooled salad dressing over the pasta mixture. Stir in tomatoes and olives. Chill overnight.





Calling grass control

Stop crabgrass before it starts

SOME TOLERATE CRABGRASS, WHILE others actively try to control it. Yet, I've never met anyone who likes it. While considered a pest in lawns and landscapes, crabgrass is high in protein and easily digested by livestock. It is drought-tolerant and is considered a famine crop.

The seeds can be harvested and ground into flour or cooked whole, similar to couscous. In other parts of the world, it is a staple grain. But let's be honest, you're not reading this to learn about the uses of crabgrass. You want to know how to kill it. We will get to that, but first, we need to lay a foundation that will help with control.

What's crabgrass?

There are two common species that thrive in our low-cut lawns, smooth crabgrass and large/hairy crabgrass. We'll refer to both as crabgrass for this article, as management is identical.

Crabgrass is a summer annual grass. It germinates in the spring, grows over summer, flowers and sets seed in late summer, and dies completely in the fall, leaving only its seed to continue the cycle next year.

How did it get in my yard?

Studies show that crabgrass seed can survive up to three years buried

in the soil. Considering some plant seeds survive for decades or longer, three years isn't that long, relatively. However, crabgrass is a colonizing species. It can thrive in disturbed soils.

For example, if you just installed a new fence or patio, it wouldn't be a big surprise if crabgrass shows up next year where you were digging if the soil remained mostly bare. Crabgrass seed can also blow in or be brought into your yard by foraging wildlife.

Controlling crabgrass

If you have had crabgrass problems in the past, the simplest way to prevent it from returning next spring is a preemergent herbicide, also called a crabgrass preventer. Active ingredients vary, but most crabgrass preventers include fertilizer as a convenience to the homeowner.

It is recommended to avoid these products, as they compromise the ideal timing for either herbicide or fertilizer applications. Finding a crabgrass preemergent without fertilizer may require talking with your local garden center or ordering it online.

Timing is critical for preemergent application, as it prevents the weed seed from successfully germinating. Apply too late, and the crabgrass preventer won't work. Crabgrass germinates when soil temperatures

reach 55 degrees Fahrenheit for a few consecutive days.

However, you want your pre-emergent down before germination. The yellow spring flowers of forsythia are often used as an indicator that it is time to apply crabgrass preventer. Forsythia works in most cases, but not all, so don't put all your faith in its bloom.

If crabgrass has already sprouted, post-emergent herbicides containing quinclorac can be used to kill young plants through June. Late-season herbicides are often a waste, as the plants have already gone to seed and are about to die naturally.

The best defense

Whether you use herbicides or not, the best way to combat crabgrass is to have a dense, tall stand of lawn. Crabgrass thrives in a low-cut lawn. Raise the mower deck to three inches or higher to make your lawn more competitive against crabgrass. In addition, regularly overseed and apply fertilizer in the late summer to early fall for cool-season lawns.

If it is growing in your yard, don't sweat it. Crabgrass dies every year and can be controlled given enough time. Plus, there are far worse weeds to deal with when it comes to our lawns. I'm looking at you, quackgrass. 🐧



Chris Enroth is a horticulture educator with the University of Illinois Extension, serving Henderson, Knox, McDonough and Warren counties. This column also appears in the "Good Growing" blog at go.illinois.edu/GoodGrowing.



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Illinois Seasons

SnapShots Photography Contest

From the cityscape of Chicago to the forests of southern Illinois, the Land of Lincoln is beautiful in every season.

Illinois Country Living is enhancing its **SnapShots** section and is accepting entries for its 2026 Photography Contest, featuring four categories:

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- 📷 Inclusion in the 2027 SnapShots Calendar
- 📷 Statewide exposure for your photography

CONTEST HIGHLIGHTS:

- 📷 One Grand Champion
- 📷 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners in each category
- 📷 Runners-up will be published in the SnapShots section in 2027

KEY DETAILS:

- 📷 Photos must be taken in Illinois
- 📷 Open only to Illinois electric co-op members
- 📷 Deadline: Aug. 1, 2026
- 📷 Limit: Three submissions per category
- 📷 Photos must be high-res digital files

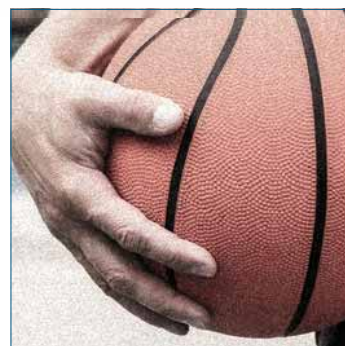


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