

NOVEMBER 2026

Illinois Country Living

A SKY FULL OF STARS

The conservation
of darkness

FEATURE
A country Christmas

PRAIRIE TABLE
**Medici and a
mulberry tree**

FINEST COOKING
Taking sides

+
**CO-OP
NEWS**



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Eye Doctor Helps Illinois Legally Blind To See

High Technology For Low Vision Patients Allows Many To Drive Again



For many patients with macular degeneration and other vision-related conditions, the loss of central visual detail also signals the end to one of the last bastions of independence: driving. A Mascoutah optometrist, Dr. Marianne McDaniel, is using miniaturized telescopes that are mounted in glasses to help people who have lost vision from macular degeneration and other eye conditions.

"Some of my patients consider me the last stop for people who have vision loss," said Dr. McDaniel, one of only a few doctors in the world who specialize in fitting bioptic telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other debilitating eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. If you're a low vision patient, you've probably not only imagined them, but have been searching for

them. Bioptic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you the independence you've been looking for. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50 or better.

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and vision loss in people over 50. Despite this, most adults are not familiar with the



A scene as it might be viewed by a person with age-related macular degeneration.

condition. As many as 25% of those over the age of 50 have some degree of macular degeneration. The macula is only one small part of the retina; however, it is the most sensitive and gives us sharp central vision. When it degenerates, macular degeneration leaves a blind spot right in the center of vision, making it difficult or impossible to recognize faces, read a book, or pass the driver's vision test.

Nine out of 10 people who have macular degeneration have the dry form. New research suggests vitamins can help. The British medical journal BMC Ophthalmology recently reported that 56% of patients treated with a high-dose combination of vitamins experienced improved vision after six months.

While age is the most significant risk factor for developing the disease, heredity, smoking, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure have also been identified as risk factors.

Macular degeneration accounts for 90% of new legal blindness in the U.S. While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. "My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning, especially driving," says Dr. McDaniel.

"Bioptic telescopes can cost over \$2,000," said Dr. McDaniel, "especially if we build them with an automatic sunglass."

"The major benefit of the bioptic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you're looking at," said Dr. McDaniel. "It's like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise."

To learn more about bioptic telescopes or to schedule a consultation, give Dr. McDaniel a call. You can also visit our websites.

www.mascoutaheyecare.com

1-618-566-8899

Office located in Mascoutah, Illinois
Marianne McDaniel, O.D.



Illinois Country Living

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On the cover: The Milky Way captured at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY FOREST PRESERVES, BY KEVIN RAILSBACK

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 210,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

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The cost of recovery

As FEMA faces changes, co-ops stress the need for timely disaster aid

IN THE SUMMER OF 2024, several electric cooperatives in Illinois were hit by a devastating derecho — a widespread, intense windstorm produced by a line of severe thunderstorms. The powerful storms caused extensive damage, including downed trees, damaged power lines, flooding and extended power outages.

When widespread damage occurs, federal reimbursement may be available for power restoration, debris removal and emergency response. Cooperatives are eligible for reimbursements if the damage meets the threshold for a presidential disaster declaration.

It was reported that Illinois received more than \$300 million in federal assistance following the presidential disaster declaration in 2024. Last year, a devastating ice storm left 19 of Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op's 20 substations without power in Michigan, resulting in \$150 million in recovery costs — 115 times the cost of any previous storm in the co-op's history. Crews rebuilt the electric grid in just three weeks.

As severe storms become more frequent across Illinois — the state has experienced 172 confirmed tornadoes so far this year alone — financial assistance for restoration is more important than ever.

Without the federal funding, each cooperative would have to absorb and then pass along the costs of rebuilding directly to its members.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) mission is to "help people before, during and after disasters." It does so by coordinating the federal government's response to natural disasters, emergencies, and other large-scale incidents that overwhelm local and state resources. It accomplishes this by providing assistance — deploying resources such as search-and-rescue teams, disaster medical assistance and funding.

Currently, a bill in Congress — the Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act — seeks to shift the responsibility of responding to natural disasters and funding recovery efforts to states and local units of government.

In its May report, the FEMA Review Council recommended that the agency equip state and local governments to lead disaster recovery efforts, with FEMA serving in a supporting role.

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association supports the effort because it would potentially streamline FEMA and dramatically speed up the delivery of crucial relief funds to electric cooperatives devastated by natural disasters. The 2024 derecho highlights the importance of a quick response, given the number of co-ops and consumer-members impacted.

As the federal government considers changes to FEMA, the priority for Illinois co-ops is, as always, to ensure that our communities can recover quickly and safely from natural disasters.

For Illinois electric cooperatives, timely and reliable disaster assistance is essential to restoring power, protecting the communities they serve and minimizing the financial burden on their members, regardless of how that assistance is delivered. ⚡



Brenda Carter is vice president of regulatory compliance at the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives.

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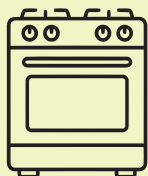
NOVEMBER CHECKLIST

Serve up savings in the kitchen during the holidays.

Use the right appliance for the job.



For smaller dishes, use smaller appliances, like slow cookers, air fryers and toaster ovens.

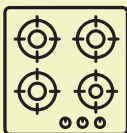


Don't peek.

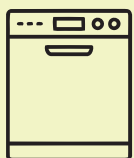
Instead of opening the oven

door, use the oven light and window to check on food.

Keep the stovetop clean.



Food buildup and residue can interfere with the connection between cookware and the heating element, making cooking less efficient.



Maximize the dishwasher.

Running full loads uses

less energy and water than running multiple partial loads.



Drayton Davis (right) competes in and wins the 40-foot transition climbing challenge at the Lineman's Safety Rodeo. Davis, a Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative lineworker, also earned best individual lineman overall.

Put to the test

Lineworkers from across Illinois compete in Lineman's Safety Rodeo

Climbing utility poles, maneuvering around energized equipment and rescuing injured coworkers are all part of the demanding work electric utility lineworkers are trained to perform. On Sept. 24, lineworkers from across Illinois put those skills to the test during the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives' (AIEC) annual Lineman's Safety Rodeo.

Held at the Lincoln Land Community College line school yard in Springfield, the event brought together 22 teams representing 15 electric cooperatives and two municipal electric utilities, as well as a team of line school students. Five lineworkers also competed individually.

The friendly competition challenged participants to demonstrate the skills they use in their everyday work, with an emphasis on safety, accuracy and efficiency. Although speed played a role in determining the winners, completing each task safely and correctly was the top priority.

Competitors were evaluated on their completion times, proper execution of tasks and adherence to safe work practices. Mistakes such as dropping tools, slipping while climbing or using improper procedures resulted in point deductions.

The rodeo featured several events designed to challenge lineworkers' climbing abilities, technical knowledge and emergency response skills.

In the egg climb, competitors climbed a utility pole while carrying an egg, testing their ability to move smoothly and maintain control. The challenge required a steady hand and careful technique, as a broken egg could mean lost points.

The cutout change tested participants' ability to replace a protective device used on electric distribution lines. The event required competitors to demonstrate proper work procedures and equipment handling while completing the task efficiently.

During the H-structure crossover, lineworkers navigated a structure consisting of two utility poles connected by a horizontal crossarm. The event challenged their ability to maneuver safely at elevated heights while maintaining proper climbing and fall-protection techniques.

One of the rodeo's most important challenges was the hurt man rescue, which simulated an emergency involving an incapacitated lineworker atop a utility pole. Competitors had to demonstrate their ability to safely reach and lower the injured worker to the ground.

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.

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

ILLINOIS TRIVIA CHALLENGE

It's time to test your knowledge with a new Illinois Trivia Challenge! This month features the creations of Illinois inventors. Answers are on page 33.



- Which famous Illinois inventor is known for the first cast steel plow, created in 1837 in Grand Detour?
A. Jerome Case; B. John Deere; C. Massey Ferguson;
D. Abe Zimmerman
- Which of these carnival ride staples that debuted in 1893 was invented by a civil engineer born in Galesburg?
A. Roller coaster; B. Carousel; C. Ferris Wheel;
D. Tilt-A-Whirl
- What lunchbox dessert favorite was invented by James Alexander Dewar on April 6, 1930, in Schiller Park?
A. Oatmeal Creme Pie; B. Swiss Cake Roll; C. Nutty Buddy;
D. Twinkie
- What kitchen appliance did Josephine Cochrane invent in her toolshed in Shelbyville in 1886?
A. Stand mixer; B. Dishwasher; C. Waffle iron;
D. Rotisserie
- What candy bar was introduced by Chicago's Curtiss Candy Co. in 1920?
A. Milky Way; B. Baby Ruth; C. Snickers; D. Butterfinger

Continued from page 7



Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative's team of Gavin Bennett (left), Grant Cooper (right) and Shane Ruppert (not pictured) earned Best Overall Team at the Lineman's Safety Rodeo.

The competition also included a 40-foot transition climbing challenge, testing a lineworker's ability to climb and transition safely while working high above the ground.

Although the events were competitive, each reinforced the importance of proper training, teamwork and safe work habits — skills that help protect lineworkers and the communities they serve.

Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative earned Best Overall Team. The team of Gavin Bennett, Grant Cooper and Shane Ruppert also claimed first place in the H-structure crossover, cutout change and egg climb events.

Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association's team of Andy Ahner, Tyler Atchison and Mike Smith earned first place in the hurt man rescue. Smith also took home first place in the individual hurt man rescue competition.

Drayton Davis of Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative earned best individual lineman overall. He also placed first in the individual H-structure crossover and egg climb events and won the 40-foot transition climbing challenge.

Beyond the awards, the rodeo provided an opportunity for lineworkers from different utilities to demonstrate their abilities, learn from one another and reinforce the safe work practices that are essential to their profession.

For more photos and to see full results, go to aiec.coop/2026-aiec-linemans-safety-rodeo.

AIEC

Finegan elected to CFC board of directors

Tyler Finegan has been elected to the board of directors of the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC). Finegan has served on the Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative board since 2019 and represents the co-op on the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives board.



Finegan, a resident of Ashkum, was elected Sept. 22 during CFC's Districts 5 and 6 meeting in Minneapolis, Minn. He will represent District 5, which includes Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, and will serve a three-year term beginning after CFC's annual meeting in June 2027.

CFC is a member-owned financial cooperative that provides financing and other financial services to electric cooperatives nationwide.

CFC



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/s/Colten Bradford



IEC MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIPS

20 \$3,000 scholarships available

Twenty academic scholarships are available to high school seniors through the Thomas H. Moore Illinois Electric Cooperatives Memorial Scholarship program. The \$3,000 scholarships will be awarded in 2027 to financially assist students in the electric co-op family.

Twelve scholarships are designated for those attending a 2- or 4-year college, university or technical school; six for those enrolling at an Illinois community college; and one, the Earl W. Struck Memorial Scholarship, for the child of an Illinois electric cooperative employee or director.

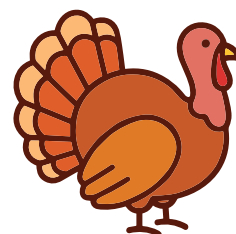
The 20th scholarship, the LaVern and Nola McEntire Memorial Lineworker's Scholarship, will help offset the cost of attending lineworker school at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield.

Applicants are judged based on their academic achievements, work and volunteer experience, and community involvement. Creative, thoughtful responses in the required written essay are key to standing out.

Applications and more information are available through your local electric cooperative or at aiec.coop/iee-scholarship. For 19 of the scholarships, the deadline to submit is Dec. 31, 2026. The deadline to apply for the lineworker scholarship is April 30, 2027. 💡

AIEC

Scan for
more info



Where is it?

The winners of the September hidden object contest were Don Flowers of Monroe County Electric Cooperative and Linda Hauser of Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative. Congratulations! Your ICL prizes have been sent.

Frankenstein's monster, hidden in the October 2026 issue, was on page 27 in the Prairie Table section. 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.

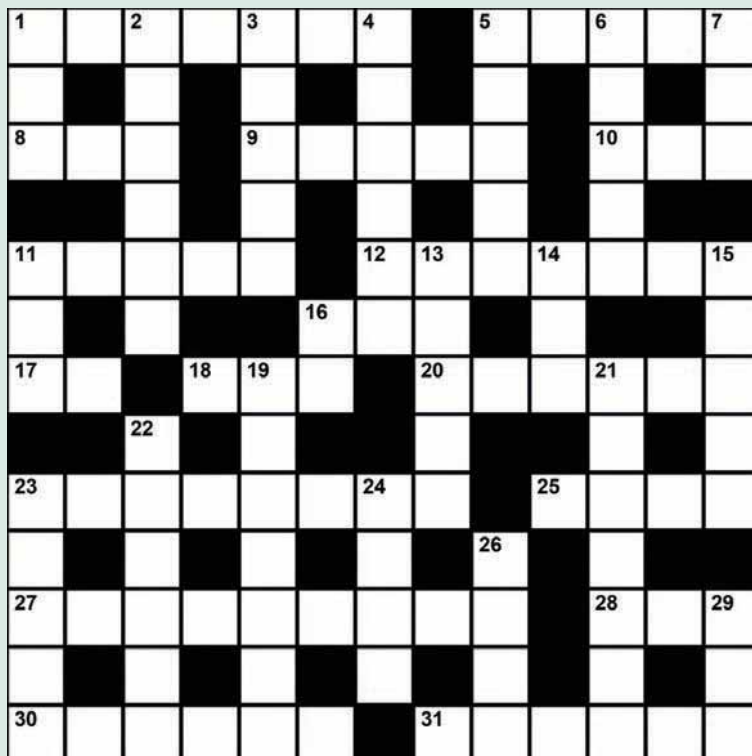
For this month's hidden object search, be on the lookout for a turkey, in honor of Thanksgiving. The symbol, pictured above, can vary in size and will NOT be hidden on this page, page 6, a lettered page (the local co-op pages) or in an ad.

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. 💡

Across

- 1 Gather ripe crops
5 Pie choice
8 ___ and cheese
9 Blender button
10 Small bread roll
11 Flower that's a symbol for military remembrance
12 Fragrance
16 Won ___ nose, 2 words
17 ___ Doubt, rock band
18 Red-white-and-blue inits.
20 Cut the steak, for example
23 First celebrants of Thanksgiving
25 Recipe direction
27 Thanks
28 Not cooked
30 Female sibling
31 Waldorf salad ingredient
- 11 Cookware component
13 Potato holders
14 Corn part
15 Pillow stuffing (duck)
16 Arts degree, abbr.
19 Watchword for all military personnel
21 One who has seen considerable active military service
22 Desserts made of ice cream in a soda
23 Sheets of a book
24 Hawaiian island
26 Greek cheese
29 Humor



Down

- 1 Breakfast meat
2 Cooking instructions
3 Needing filling
4 Thanksgiving bird
5 Readies the dinner, e.g.
6 High-quality cigar
7 Grandma, for short



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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER **Datebook**

LET'S GO!

Nov. 14-15 **AutumnFest Arts and Crafts Show** CARTERVILLE

Shop for handcrafted arts, crafts and specialty foods at this annual fair

Nov. 28 **Stroll on State** ROCKFORD

A holiday season kickoff event featuring a tree lighting, parade, fireworks, wagon rides and more

Dec. 5 **Lights Fantastic Parade** CARBONDALE

Celebrate the holiday season at a nighttime parade featuring thousands of lights

Dec. 6 **Gym Bob's Jamboree Christmas Show** BIBLE GROVE

The opry-style live music show will feature classic holiday tunes

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



Nouveau Celebration

NOVEMBER
20

Galena celebrates the release of Galena Cellars' 2026 Nouveau wine with its 42nd Annual Nouveau Celebration. Revelers travel along historic Main Street in horse-drawn wagons, trolleys and other festive modes of transportation as the new wine is delivered to participating merchants. The celebration continues throughout the weekend with live music, wine tastings, special dinners, receptions and events at local businesses.

Nov. 20, 2026: 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

- Galena Cellars, 111 N. Main St., Galena
Admission: free
galenacellars.com

Broadway Cookie Walk

NOVEMBER
28

Celebrate the holiday season at the third annual Broadway Cookie Walk. Participants can stroll among local businesses to collect limited-edition gourmet cookies while enjoying activities such as face painting, visits with Santa and snowball fights with the Grinch. Tickets include a collectible bag, cookies, exclusive coupons and other holiday surprises. Only 300 tickets are available for this festive family tradition. Register online.

Nov. 28, 2026: 9 a.m.-2 p.m.

- The Broadway District, 1913 Broadway Ave., Mattoon
Admission: \$20
visitmattoon.com/event/broadway-cookie-walk



Dickens on the Square

DECEMBER
4-5

Journey into the past for Dickens on the Square in historic downtown Macomb. This family-friendly holiday festival features colorful characters, food, music, Clydesdale-drawn carriage rides, live reindeer and visits with Santa. Visitors can soak up the nostalgic, small-town Christmas atmosphere while enjoying festivities around the downtown courthouse square.

Dec. 4, 2026: 6-9 p.m. and Dec. 5: all day

- Downtown Macomb, 120 E. Calhoun St., Macomb
visitforgottonia.com/local-events

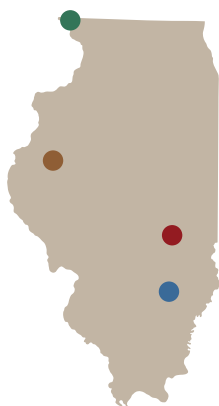
A Night in Bethlehem

DECEMBER
5-6

Step back in time and experience the sights and sounds of Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth. Hosted by Flora Church of the Nazarene, this free, family-friendly event invites visitors to meet Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus and other biblical figures as they share their stories. Stroll through the Bethlehem Market, visit with merchants and enjoy treats from the Bethlehem Bakery.

Dec. 5-6, 2026: 6-8 p.m.

- Flora Church of the Nazarene, 12 Parsons Lane, Flora
Admission: free
floranazarene.org



NUMBER	NUMBER	NUMBER	NUMBER	NUMBER	NUMBER	NUMBER
27	28	29	30	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31



As harvest season ends, many farmers begin preparing their fields for the next season, oftentimes conducting controlled burns.

A burning concern

Help prevent utility pole damage

FARMERS PLAY A CRUCIAL role in keeping communities across Illinois thriving. As the harvest season ends and fields are prepared for the year ahead, we remind farmers to exercise caution when conducting controlled burns near utility poles and other electrical equipment.

Over the next few months, many farmers may conduct controlled burns to clear crop stubble and weeds as they prepare fields for spring planting. While controlled burns are an effective way to manage agricultural land, they can also pose serious risks to nearby utility poles, power lines and other electrical equipment.

Every year, utility poles are damaged during controlled burns in fields, along roadsides and in ditches. The danger is compounded because damage to poles may not be immediately visible after the fire has passed.

When exposed to fire, poles can sustain hidden damage. Embers can become lodged in cracks or other openings in the pole and continue burning inside long after the flames have disappeared. In some cases, a utility pole can burn from the inside

out and collapse hours or even days after a controlled burn has ended.

A damaged utility pole can create a dangerous situation for farm workers, co-op crews and the public. Repairing or replacing a utility pole can be expensive and time-consuming. More importantly, a weakened pole can fall unexpectedly, bringing power lines down with it.

Depending on the location and extent of the fire damage, a single compromised pole can quickly result in power outages affecting homes, farms, businesses and nearby communities. Farmers planning controlled burns should keep the following important safety measures in mind:

- **Maintain a safe distance from utility equipment.** Avoid burning directly beneath or near utility poles, guy wires, transformers and other electrical equipment.
- **Monitor the weather.** Avoid burning during dry, windy conditions when flames and embers can spread quickly.

- **Create firebreaks.** Clear vegetation and other combustible materials from the area to keep the fire contained.
- **Have water and fire suppression equipment nearby.** Be prepared to respond if the fire moves beyond the intended burn area.
- **Monitor the fire until it is completely extinguished.** Never assume a fire is out simply because flames are no longer visible.
- **Inspect nearby utility poles after the burn.** If a pole is actively burning, call the fire department. If a pole appears scorched, damaged or otherwise compromised, contact your electric cooperative. Never attempt to repair electrical equipment yourself.

Controlled burns can be an important part of agricultural operations, but they should be conducted safely. If you have questions about how a planned burn could affect nearby electrical equipment, contact your electric cooperative before you begin. 💡



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Abby Berry writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.



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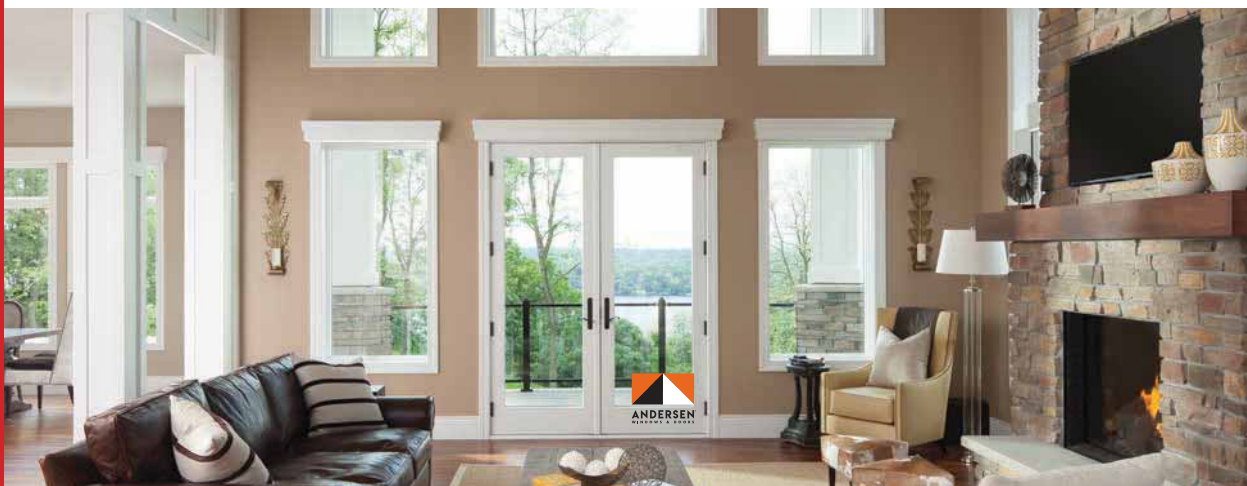
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Thick curtains can help keep heat out in the summer and make the room feel warmer in the winter.

Recommendations for renters

Save energy under someone else's roof

RENTING A HOUSE OR apartment can put you in a challenging spot when it comes to energy efficiency. Renting means that you can't make all the decisions about energy efficiency upgrades. At the same time, renters are usually responsible for paying the electric bill. That means if the home has inefficient equipment, you're going to use — and pay for — more energy.

Typically, it is the owner's responsibility to make efficiency upgrades, such as adding insulation or providing new heating and cooling equipment. Don't assume they won't. If the home needs upgrades, just ask. I've had landlords let me pay for an upgrade, then provide a credit on my rent to offset the cost.

In a situation where you don't have control over all the decisions, choose to focus on what you can control.

The thermostat is a great place to start. Nudging the thermostat a few degrees closer to the outside temperature can help save money. Adjust the settings when you aren't home or at night when you're sleeping.

Adding thick curtains can help keep heat out in the summer and

make the room feel warmer in the winter. A rug can make a cold floor feel warmer. These additions can make changing the thermostat a few degrees more comfortable.

Make sure your property owner follows through on annual maintenance and HVAC filter changes. Ignoring these can lead to unnecessary energy waste.

Lighting is another element you can typically control. If your home has incandescent or compact fluorescent bulbs, switch to LEDs. If you don't have the ability to change the lighting, consider using plug-in LED lighting or lamps instead.

Check whether your water heater is wasting energy. The U.S. Department of Energy recommends setting it to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. This keeps the water hot enough to be safely stored in the tank while reducing the risk of scalding. Call the owner or property management company to request an adjustment.

One of the benefits of renting is that you aren't on the hook when equipment breaks down. If the water heater is at least 10 years old

or shows signs of possible failure (leaking, unusual noises or discolored water), let the owner know. Upgrading to a heat pump water heater could be a great fit for your home, saving energy and preventing possible damage caused by a failed water heater.

Another way to save is by finding available rebates and incentives for your home. Because renters typically pay the electric bill, a landlord doesn't see the financial benefit of monthly energy savings.

You can make it easier for them by finding opportunities for energy-efficient upgrades in your home. Your rental might be eligible for insulation, water heater or HVAC upgrades. You might also be eligible for discounts on products that you can buy yourself, such as air purifiers, dehumidifiers or other small home appliances.

Energy efficiency upgrades could benefit the homeowner by increasing the property value or keeping a renter from looking for another place to live. Partnering with your landlord on these projects could benefit you as well. 💡



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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PHOTO COURTESY OF NRECA

Large-scale batteries can store electricity and discharge it when needed, helping balance supply and demand on the electric grid.

Powering what's next

The future of renewable energy

ELECTRICITY DEMAND CONTINUES

TO grow, and the energy industry is exploring new ways to generate, store and deliver energy more efficiently.

Researchers are developing technologies that could expand renewable energy options and improve how the electric grid operates, including advances in battery storage, geothermal, solar and wind energy. Here's a look at some of the innovations helping shape our energy future.

Battery storage

Large-scale batteries can store electricity and discharge it when needed, helping balance supply and demand on the electric grid.

Lithium-ion batteries are currently the most widely used option, but researchers are exploring new battery chemistries that could improve performance, reduce costs and rely on more abundant materials.

One example is sodium-ion batteries. Because sodium is widely available, these batteries could offer an alternative to lithium-ion technology for certain applications, including large-scale energy storage. While they currently store less energy than comparable lithium-ion batteries, researchers are working to improve their performance.

Another area of research is solid-state batteries, which use solid materials instead of liquid electrolytes to move energy within the battery.

Researchers are investigating whether this design could improve safety and increase the amount of energy that can be stored in a given space.

Geothermal

Geothermal energy uses heat from beneath the earth's surface to generate electricity. Traditionally, geothermal power plants have been limited to areas with naturally occurring underground reservoirs of hot water or steam.

Researchers are now developing enhanced geothermal systems (EGS), which could make geothermal energy possible in more locations. Demonstration projects across the U.S. are testing these technologies in different geological environments and helping researchers better understand their potential.

Unlike solar and wind resources, geothermal energy can operate around the clock because it relies on heat stored beneath the earth's surface. If EGS technology proves successful, it could provide another source of consistent renewable electricity.

Solar

Solar photovoltaic (PV) systems convert sunlight into electricity, but researchers continue to look for ways to make solar panels more efficient.

One area of research focuses on perovskites, materials that may improve how efficiently solar cells convert sunlight into electricity.

Tandem solar cells combine perovskites with traditional silicon cells to capture more of the sun's energy.

Researchers are also exploring new panel designs, including vertically mounted systems that could produce electricity at different times of day while potentially reducing the amount of land needed for solar development.

Wind

Wind turbines generate electricity by using moving air to turn blades connected to a generator. Turbines have grown larger and more efficient over time, allowing them to produce more electricity from available wind resources.

Innovation is also expanding where wind energy can be deployed. Floating offshore wind turbines can operate in deeper waters where traditional fixed-bottom structures may not be practical. Airborne wind energy systems use tethered devices to access stronger winds at higher elevations.

Many of these technologies are still being researched and tested, but they demonstrate the range of innovation shaping our energy future. As Illinois' electric cooperatives work to provide safe, reliable and affordable electricity, we'll continue monitoring emerging technologies and considering how they may support the long-term energy needs of the communities we serve. 💡



Steph Joven writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.

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A SKY FULL OF STARS

THE CONSERVATION OF DARKNESS

By Colten Bradford

AMONG THE CHORUS OF cicadas and under the glow of the moon and stars, dozens of people meander along Middle Fork River Forest Preserve's Dark Sky Trail with cameras and telescopes in tow for a celestial show. This was in late August, and a lunar eclipse was the highlight of the evening



Why did these people choose Middle Fork? Well, the preserve offers something increasingly difficult to find. It's a place where darkness itself is protected — where carefully designed outdoor lighting helps preserve views of the night sky.

The 1,700-acre forest preserve near Penfield — a 40-minute drive northeast of Champaign-Urbana — is Illinois' only International Dark Sky Park, a designation recognizing not only the quality of its night sky but also efforts to protect it and educate visitors about the importance of darkness.

Today, visitors from all over the world think that darkness is worth seeing as they travel to this remote corner of Illinois to gaze at the stars and, under the right conditions, even see the Milky Way.

A bright idea

Located away from the glow of cities and towns and served by Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve's journey to becoming Illinois' sole Dark Sky Park required an unusual conservation effort. Getting there started with an idea, and it wasn't about simply turning off the lights.

"The sky is something worth preserving," says Dave Leake, member of the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society (CUAS). "One could ask, 'What's the big deal about the Grand Canyon?' Well, of course, it's awe-inspiring. It's amazing what nature has done. Well, to me, we have that same thing over our heads. It's just that few people can see it these days with all the lights around."

Leake has been looking up for most of his life. He caught what he calls the "astronomy bug" in fifth grade and eventually went on to study physics at the University of Illinois. His career took him to Parkland College, where he taught physics and astronomy and eventually became director of the William M. Staerck Planetarium. He has since retired.

His involvement in astronomy also helped lead to the formation of CUAS, a nonprofit organization of astronomy enthusiasts dedicated to promoting interest in astronomy through public education, stargazing events and astronomical observation.

In the late 2000s, CUAS began holding star watches at the preserve. Members took sky-quality readings throughout Champaign County, and their measurements confirmed that Middle Fork was among the darkest locations in the county. Then a possibility emerged — could Middle Fork become an officially recognized Dark Sky Park?

DarkSky International was founded in 1988 to combat light pollution, and the organization's International Dark Sky Places program, which recognizes communities and parks committed to preserving dark skies, began in 2001.

Leake first approached the forest preserve about pursuing a Dark Sky designation in 2012 but didn't get far. He tried again a few years later after a change in leadership and, in 2015, was invited to explain the idea to the district's Citizens Advisory Committee.



Left: The start of a lunar eclipse at the end of August, viewed from Middle Fork River Forest Preserve.

Right: A visitor uses a red-filtered flashlight to navigate the park without disrupting the darkness or affecting the night vision needed for stargazing.

Other Dark Sky Places in Illinois

While Middle Fork River Forest Preserve may be Illinois' only certified International Dark Sky Park, it isn't the state's only area recognized by DarkSky International. Illinois is home to one Urban Night Sky Place (a municipal park or open space near a large urban area whose design actively promotes an authentic nighttime experience) and two International Dark Sky Communities (municipalities dedicated to the preservation of the night sky through lighting, education and citizen support).

- **Palos Preserve, Urban Night Sky Place**

Surrounded by Chicago, Palos Preserve was designated in 2021. It promotes responsible outdoor lighting and gives urban and suburban residents opportunities to experience and learn about the night sky.

- **Homer Glen and Hawthorn Woods, International Dark Sky Communities**

Homer Glen became Illinois' first International Dark Sky Community in 2011, followed by Hawthorn Woods in 2020. Both are part of Chicago's greater metropolitan area.

Sitting in the audience was Middle Fork Site Superintendent Matt Kuntz, who was closely following the discussion.

Leake explained that pursuing the designation would require changes to the preserve's outdoor lighting, including replacing globe-style fixtures that scattered light in all directions.

"You mean I can finally get rid of those globe lights?" Kuntz remembers asking, and he was convinced.

Preserving the night

Kuntz studied conservation in college. He learned about the conservation of forests, prairies, rivers, streams and wetlands. But, he says, nobody talked about the sky.

"I was basically trained to stop looking after you got to the top of a tree," he says. "It doesn't matter after that. But the sky should be a big part of our conservation efforts as well."

Middle Fork — which is part of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, an agency dedicated to protecting natural areas in Champaign County — required a few upgrades to preserve the skies above. That effort started with replacing those globe lights.

To pursue the International Dark Sky Park designation, the preserve couldn't simply remove its electric lights. As the operator of a campground and public recreation area, it still needed lighting for visitors.

This required some reconsiderations. They had to learn about lumens, light color and different types of fixtures that would direct illumination downward rather than allowing it to escape into the sky.

Fixtures were installed throughout the preserve and were recessed or shielded to keep illumination where needed. Kuntz describes it as more deliberate lighting.

That distinction is important to Leake. "Any light that shines up is not useful," he says.

Kuntz understands the concern that can arise when people hear the word "dark." As an operator of a campground, he's responsible for visitors' safety. It was never an option to turn off every light.

The project received community support, too. The Forest Preserve Friends Foundation helped raise money for the necessary changes, and community organizations provided letters supporting the designation.

After about a year and a half of work — including lighting upgrades, darkness level research, programming development and more — the preserve officially became an International Dark Sky Park in November 2018.

They came for the stars

Protecting the night sky has produced another unexpected result in Middle Fork. Visitors from all over the world have come to see it. There's even a name for it — astrotourism.

Leake meets people from all over during CUAS star watches. And while the preserve doesn't have a reliable way to count every visitor, Kuntz says campground revenue has increased at least 30% since Middle Fork received its Dark Sky designation.

"I never would have thought [they] would find us here in the middle of Champaign County," Kuntz says of the tourists he's met.

The uptick in astrotourists eventually created a problem — full parking lots and traffic jams. Kuntz had to figure out where to direct travelers who weren't staying at the preserve's campsites.

They needed a destination within the destination. His solution was the Dark Sky Trail complex. The trail, designed for visitors of all abilities, welcomes daytime and nighttime visitors and includes interpretive signage about dark skies.

An observatory built by the forest preserve houses a telescope

provided with help from CUAS. It isn't open for everyday public use, but it is used during staffed programs and special events.

The preserve also added 11 dark sky-friendly campsites, which Kuntz says are booked solid every weekend.

"It's one of those great problems to have," he says of the demand.

A view worth protecting

Earning the designation wasn't the end of Middle Fork's work. Maintaining it requires continued reporting, sky-quality measurements and public education. The preserve hosts dark sky programs and star watches. Astronomical events, such as meteor showers or lunar eclipses, draw visitors even when no program is scheduled.

For Kuntz, those visitors are reminders of why the effort matters. He grew up on a farm not far from Middle Fork. Seeing a star-filled sky wasn't special. It was simply part of growing up in the country.

Only after working toward the Dark Sky designation did he begin meeting people who had experienced something entirely different. Some, he says, were in their 60s or 70s and had never seen a truly star-filled sky because of where they had lived.

Both men hope everyone has the chance to witness a preserved night sky and believe we all can play a part in reducing light pollution. "We're not saying get rid of your lights," Kuntz says. "We're just saying adapt and change it."

The good news is that protecting dark skies doesn't necessarily require major changes. Homeowners, businesses and communities can consider whether outdoor lights are directed where needed or whether light is unnecessarily spilling upward.

Sometimes, Leake adds, more light can even be counterproductive. Poorly positioned security lights can create glare and hard

shadows, making it more difficult to see what is beyond the illuminated area.

"Astronomy is in our heritage," Leake says. "We get caught up with our phones and watch streaming television shows, but [when] you get outside, you realize there's so much more out there."

"I think people take the night sky for granted," Kuntz adds. "I know I did."

To learn more about Middle Fork River Forest Preserve or view its calendar of events, go to champaignforests.org. For upcoming CUAS stargazing events, go to cuas.org/calendar. For more information about DarkSky International, visit darksky.org. 

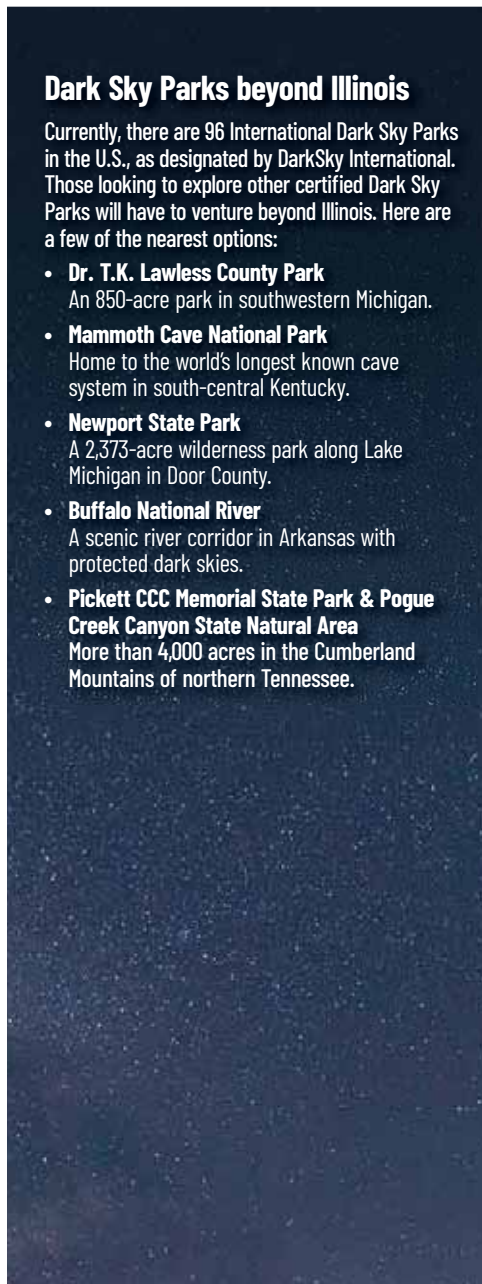
Dark Sky Parks beyond Illinois

Currently, there are 96 International Dark Sky Parks in the U.S., as designated by DarkSky International. Those looking to explore other certified Dark Sky Parks will have to venture beyond Illinois. Here are a few of the nearest options:

- **Dr. T.K. Lawless County Park**
An 850-acre park in southwestern Michigan.
- **Mammoth Cave National Park**
Home to the world's longest known cave system in south-central Kentucky.
- **Newport State Park**
A 2,373-acre wilderness park along Lake Michigan in Door County.
- **Buffalo National River**
A scenic river corridor in Arkansas with protected dark skies.
- **Pickett CCC Memorial State Park & Pogue Creek Canyon State Natural Area**
More than 4,000 acres in the Cumberland Mountains of northern Tennessee.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY FOREST PRESERVES, BY BLAKE SMITH



A country Christmas

Holiday treasures await along southern Illinois backroads

By Mary Blye Kramer

IT'S AUTUMN, AND MORE than a dozen working barns in and around Metropolis are about to undergo a holiday transformation. Tractors are pulled out, farm equipment is tucked away and a few woolly sheep are sent to pasture. In their place come handmade crafts, repurposed treasures, Christmas decor and homemade goodies for the annual Christmas Barn Sale Trail.

The trail in Massac County began with a shopping trip. In 2017, sisters-in-law Monica Obermark and Chasida Williams visited a couple of barn sales and left inspired. They brought the idea home, and soon Amy Williams, another sister-in-law, their husbands and a few friends were on board. They set a date for the following year and spent the months leading up to it creating and collecting items for barn sales of their own.

As interest grew among craftspeople and shoppers alike, the trail expanded from four barns to 17, but with more stops added, crowds continued to grow. Many of the barns are located on Southern Illinois Electric Cooperative lines.

Regular customer Kelley Sullivan eventually suggested offering a paid pass that would give a limited number of shoppers early access. The sisters-in-law loved the idea, and one of the trail's most popular traditions — the VIP pass — was born.

VIP passes go on sale June 1 each year for \$25 and are limited to 400 shoppers. They sell out quickly. Passholders get exclusive access to all participating barns on Thursday, a day before the trail opens to the public Friday and Saturday. VIP shoppers can also pick up a bingo card to have stamped at each barn they visit. Completed cards can be turned in at any barn for entry into a prize drawing.



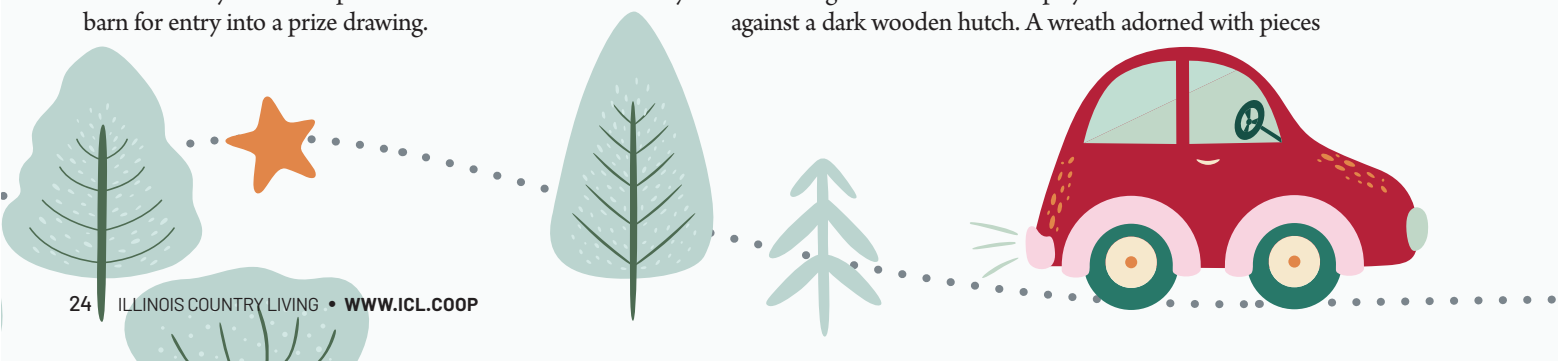
There's an added incentive to snag a VIP pass early. The first 100 shoppers to sign up receive a gift bag filled with small craft items, coupons and treats. Tammie Wiseman Obermark, one of the barn owners, says the bag alone is worth the price of admission.

With the number of stops along the trail, visiting every barn can take more than a day. Some shoppers return for a second day, while others stick to their favorite stops. But for many, the trail is about more than shopping — it's also a fun weekend with friends. Kelley and six longtime friends, for example, meet for lunch before piling into two cars and squeezing in as much shopping as they can.

Each stop along the trail offers something different. Many of the barns host multiple vendors, including Tammie's, where shoppers can browse everything from vintage aprons and unique wreaths to crocheted ornaments, pottery, handmade pet collars and soaps.

"People are traveling, and so they like little things they can easily get into their cars," Tammie says. She describes the assortment "like Grandma's basement," and she makes room for local vendors and organizations.

Four vendors share space in the Blessed + Grateful barn, where elegant white candles displayed on china stand out against a dark wooden hutch. A wreath adorned with pieces





of china and coordinating ribbons catches the eye, while fully decorated Christmas trees, carefully arranged home decor and shelves of pristine china fill the space.

The Market at Deasel Cattle Company also brings together multiple vendors and an eclectic mix of merchandise. Shoppers might find whimsical Santas — including cowboy and hippie versions — alongside vintage kitchenware, such as teapots and cake pans, and plenty of Christmas decor.

Carol Ellerbusch, owner of the barn at Lay Lay's Cowhide Company, creates every item in the 2,000-plus-square-foot barn. One wall holds distressed framed pictures which Carol decoupages. She sells a lot of ornaments, which she makes from porch spindles and chandeliers, as well as a variety of trees also set on spindles.

Melissa Thomasson, who solos at Faerie Glen, had a line nearly out the door last year within an hour after the VIP opening. She loves repurposing old quilts, cutting out the designs and sewing them onto pillows and sweatshirts.

One of her most popular items is her "blind date with a book." Each one is wrapped, adorned with sprigs of holly and spruce, with a pouch of tea and a bookmark tucked into a pocket she's made for the cover.

The trail also includes stops at Junkey Girl's for a can't-miss glimpse of their "flower pot people" and at Giltner Family Farm for unique crocheted vintage greeting cards. Many visitors cannot resist picking out a whimsical wooden snowman at Burnham's Crafts, and



Southern Blend's gift packets are both beautiful and fragrant.

The sisters-in-law behind the barn trail do more than organize the event each year — they also operate barns of their own. Amy and Monica run the 606 Market Barn Edition, an extension of the store the three women own in Metropolis.

Amy, who is an artist, sells acrylic paintings, chalk pastels and watercolors ranging in price from \$7 to \$1,500.

Monica specializes in personalized granite pieces, "year-in-review" ornaments and furniture she gives new life through refinishing and repurposing. Chasida operates the Custom Southern Company and Poco Pickers barn, where shoppers can find an assortment of Santas, jewelry, antiques and vintage finds.

The holiday spirit extends beyond the merchandise, with many stops transforming their barns and grounds for the occasion. Each year, the Rustic Rose creates an elaborate outdoor vignette, while at the Little Grain Bin Sign Co., an old pickup truck becomes part of the decor, decked out with candy canes, a life-size Santa and cheerful gingerbread figures.

At Deasel Cattle Company, wooden business signs get a holiday makeover with colorfully wrapped packages, greenery and holly. Circle K Creations adds its own festive touch, shuttling shoppers to and from the parking lot in a bright red utility vehicle decorated for Christmas.

As the trail becomes better known, customers come from all over the U.S., including Georgia, New York, Wisconsin and Texas. Thanks to the influx of customers, many of the vendors sell up to 80% of their stock during the three-day sale.

Although barn owners want to bring business to local restaurants, virtually all of them offer snacks for sale, and some have food trucks. Depending on the barn, you may find hot chocolate, muffins, funnel cakes, tacos, or other snacks and drinks.

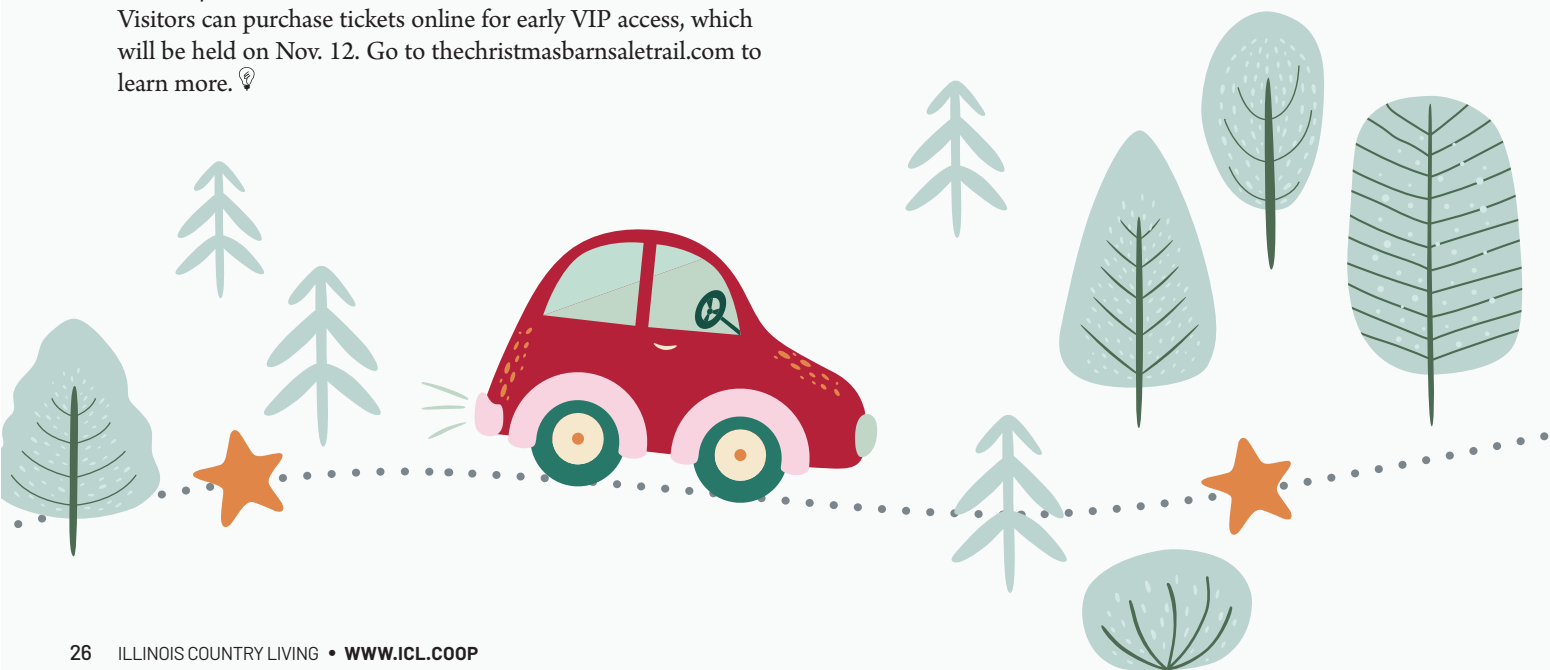
Miranda's Delights, a Vienna-based bakery with a table set up at Blessed + Grateful barn, sells pastries such as red velvet brownies, banana pudding cookies and pumpkin pies, among other items.

There's no specific route for navigating the Christmas Barn Sale Trail — and that's intentional. Organizers avoid recommending one to keep too many shoppers from arriving at the same barns at once. Maps are available at 606 Market, located in downtown Metropolis, and at each participating barn. There are also colorful directional signs along the roads that help guide shoppers from stop to stop.

After years of barn sales, there are plenty of stories to tell, but one from Chasida's most recent sale stands out. Months earlier, she had found a small hand-carved Santa and put it up for sale. While shopping on the trail, a mother and daughter spotted it and stopped. They immediately recognized the carving: The older woman's father, who died earlier that year, had made it.

Chasida didn't hesitate. "Take it," she told them. "It's yours. Please." The women insisted on paying for the Santa, taking home something far more meaningful than anything they expected to find that day. For Chasida, it was a reminder that sometimes the best find along the trail is simply the magic of the holiday season.

This year's Christmas Barn Sale Trail will be held Nov. 13-14. Visitors can purchase tickets online for early VIP access, which will be held on Nov. 12. Go to thechristmasbarnsaletrail.com to learn more. 💡



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The 2026-P Morgan Silver Dollar Reverse Proof

Struck in 2026 especially for America's 250th anniversary this Morgan features the classic Liberty and eagle designs collectors know and love, enhanced with a stunning Reverse Proof finish. What exactly is Reverse Proof? Think of it as the Morgan design turned inside out. Instead of the traditional mirror-like background with frosted details, the fields appear frosted while Liberty, the eagle and other design elements shine with brilliant, mirror-like surfaces. The result is dramatic contrast that makes this historic design practically jump off the coin.

Two Firsts for America's 250th

For the first time, the Morgan Dollar bears a special 1776 – 2026 dual date commemorating the Semiquincentennial. It also carries a one-year-only "Liberty

Bell 250" privy mark, adding another unmistakable connection to this once-in-a-generation American celebration. Each coin was struck at the U.S. Mint's historic Philadelphia facility, the nation's "Mother Mint," using carefully prepared planchets, polished dies, and multiple strikes to achieve its distinctive Reverse Proof appearance.

The Morgan Design You Know in 99.9% Silver

Look closely and you'll find the familiar artistry that made the Morgan legendary: Liberty wearing her cap, floral crown, and "LIBERTY" inscription, surrounded by 13 stars and the classic mottoes. Turn it over and the majestic eagle returns with wings spread clutching arrows and an olive branch. The difference? This modern Morgan is struck in highly pure 99.9% fine silver, giving collectors a contemporary interpretation of one of America's most recognizable silver dollar designs.

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The U.S. Mint authorized a maximum mintage of just 250,000 for these 2026-P Morgan Silver Dollars. For Morgan enthusiasts, that's a remarkably small number considering the enormous following this classic design has built over generations.

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If you're a longtime Morgan collector, a silver enthusiast or simply appreciate owning tangible pieces of American history, the 2026-P Morgan Silver Dollar Reverse Proof deserves a place in your collection. Supplies are extremely limited. Reserve yours before this modern Morgan becomes one you wish you hadn't missed.

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GOVMINT

Medici and a mulberry tree

American fare abounds at Uptown Normal restaurant

By Lisa Cherry

WHAT'S MOST NOTICEABLE UPON entering Medici in Normal is the two-story-tall mulberry tree that serves as the centerpiece of the restaurant's decor — a fitting symbol as mulberry trees historically signify abundance.

The establishment's expansive menu further echoes that sentiment, as patrons endeavor to determine what they will ultimately choose from the eclectic, American-style variety of soups, salads, starters, entrees, sandwiches, pizza, desserts and craft beers.

General Manager Joe Slane says that despite its name, Medici (pronounced "med-e-chee") is not an Italian restaurant. "When Hans bought the first place, it was called Medici — and he didn't have enough money to change the sign," he says.

The "first place" he is referring to is Medici on 57th in Chicago, which Hans Morsbach opened as a passion project. "I was familiar with [the family] ... Medici in Hyde Park, near the University of Chicago, has been there for 60-some years," says Slane.

The Normal location opened its doors in 2008. A few years later, the Morsbach family advertised for a general manager. "I was curious of what they were doing down here. I came down and talked to them and basically told them I could come down and help out for a while. ... It's now been 16 years," he laughs.

Slane, who grew up in central Illinois and most recently called Chicago home, brought with him decades of experience in the restaurant industry. "I worked for some chains when I was living in Texas and Michigan and Chicago, and then I was working for a hotel group for years, doing food and beverage," he elaborates.

"At that group, I spent several years traveling around the country. I would go into properties that were 'in transition.' ... Sometimes we literally closed it down, renovated the place, and reopened it. Sometimes it was just finding a new management team to come in."

Of the places he's worked, Slane says he prefers chef-driven restaurants, like Medici.





“We have burgers, we have pizzas. We have seafood. We have steak. We have app salads, entree salads, starter salads, a little of everything. We always have homemade soups,” he says, adding that the Salmon Brulee has been their top seller for years. “We sear it in simple syrup, so it gives it that sugary crust.”

Other favorites include their Smoked Gouda Mac and Cheese and the Smokey BBQ Beef Brisket. “We smoke our ribs in-house; we smoke our wings in-house,” says Slane. “Our gnocchi have always been popular, [and] we recently added a mushroom alfredo pasta, which is going over well.”

The stroganoff is one of the Morsbachs’ old family recipes. “That’s one of those we don’t touch on the menu,” he says. “[It’s also] my go-to when I don’t know what to get.”

Along with the familiar are more unique selections, like their Spaghetti Squash Bolognese and swordfish. And then there is pizza, pan- or stone-style, baked in a five-deck oven with a stone base.

“Our pizzas are popular,” says Slane, adding that they will happily make what customers want on request. “Most people order the ones on the menu, though. We have a Medici pizza, which is like everything pizza. ... The margherita is always a popular pizza. We have a spinach goat cheese sausage pizza. We have a barbecue pizza. [And] everyone loves chicken ranch pizzas.”

Desserts include seasonal cheesecakes (the Oreo is a big seller), a “stacked” brownie (layered with dark chocolate ganache and served with vanilla ice cream), flourless chocolate cake, seasonal creme brulees and chocolate mousse.

Menu items are done to order, he emphasizes, so most dishes can be customized. “We get a lot of people with special dietary needs. ... Just tell me what you want, and we’ll make it,” he says. “That’s even easier than trying to customize what we have.”

One of their biggest priorities is to give patrons choices. “When we’re looking at the menu, that’s one of the things we always look at — what hole do we need to fill here? Can this be a good shareable appetizer? Can this be a good vegan item?”

He says it takes a seasoned chef to manage that kind of extensive inventory. “It takes a chef who has the experience to make sure we don’t have items that go to waste. It’s being organized and having a chef who spends the time going through things.”

In addition to the menu, Medici has event space — upstairs with a patio for larger parties and downstairs for smaller groups. On Mondays, when the restaurant is closed, they sometimes offer buyouts, where large parties can take advantage of the entire restaurant. Their event space is often booked for rehearsal dinners, baby and wedding showers and retirement parties.

In the future, the staff hopes to also revive some of their pre-COVID-19 events. “We did an Oktoberfest, we did a craft beer festival, we did a barbecue festival — we did them regularly for years,” Slane shares, adding that Uptown Normal still hosts several fun festivals during the summer. “We’ve always been part of Uptown Partners and try to stay as involved as we can.”

From left: Smokey BBQ Beef Brisket, Pork Ribs, Smoked Gouda Mac and Cheese, and Peach Salad

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Taking sides

THE MAIN COURSE MAY get most of the attention, but a good side dish can be just as memorable. Whether you're preparing a weeknight dinner or planning a holiday gathering, side dishes bring variety, flavor and color to the table. Fresh vegetables offer endless possibilities, while beans and rice can be transformed into hearty, flavorful additions to any meal. Sometimes, a few simple ingredients are all it takes to create something worth sharing. So, while these side dishes may play a supporting role, they don't have to play second fiddle. 🍴

MORE RECIPES

Additional recipes can be found on our website at finestcooking.com.



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



Overnight Lettuce Salad

Submitted by Cindy Abbott, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association
Serves: 12

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 head iceberg lettuce, chopped | 1 pound bacon, cooked and crumbled |
| 1 head cauliflower, cut into florets | 1/4 cup sugar |
| 2 cups mayonnaise | 1/4 cup parmesan cheese, grated |

In a large bowl, layer the ingredients in this order: lettuce, cauliflower, mayonnaise, bacon, sugar and parmesan cheese. Do not mix. Cover and refrigerate overnight or for at least a few hours. Right before serving, toss the salad until mixed well.

Spanish Rice

Submitted by Denise Smith, Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative
Serves: 4-6

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1/4 cup butter | 1 garlic clove, minced |
| 2 cups uncooked instant rice | 1 bay leaf |
| 2 teaspoons beef bouillon, or 2 cubes | 1 teaspoon sugar |
| 1 cup boiling water | 1 teaspoon salt |
| 1 14-ounce can diced tomatoes | 1/2 teaspoon black pepper |
| 1 medium onion, chopped | |

Melt butter in a deep skillet over medium heat. Add rice and stir until browned, about 3-5 minutes. Dissolve beef bouillon in the boiling water and add to the rice. Add remaining ingredients and bring them to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Once the liquid is absorbed and the rice is tender, remove the bay leaf and serve.

Barbecued Black Beans and Rice

Submitted by Jane Miller, SouthEastern Illinois Electric Cooperative

Servings: 4

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|------------------------------------|---|
| 1 cup long-grain white rice | 1 10-ounce package frozen corn |
| 2 cups water | 2 tablespoons barbecue sauce, or to taste |
| 2 16-ounce cans black beans | 3/4 teaspoon ground cumin, or to taste |
| 1 14-ounce can stewed tomatoes | Ground black pepper, to taste |
| 1 4-ounce can chopped green chiles | |

Bring rice and water to a boil in a medium-sized saucepan. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 18 minutes, or until rice is just tender. Meanwhile, drain the beans and place them in another medium-sized saucepan. Add the tomatoes, chiles, corn, barbecue sauce and cumin. Cook the bean mixture over low heat for about 10 minutes. Taste and season with pepper and any additional cumin and/or barbecue sauce. If the rice hasn't absorbed all the water, drain off the excess. Spoon the rice into deep bowls. Ladle the black beans and sauce over the rice. **Note:** Leftovers can be thinned with broth, heated and served as soup.



Fresh Vegetable Medley

Submitted by Melody Bowden, JCE Co-op

Servings: 8

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1/4 cup butter | 1-1/2 cups corn |
| 4 zucchinis, sliced | 1/2 teaspoon dried dill |
| 1 medium onion, shredded | Salt and pepper, to taste |
| 1/2 cup green bell pepper, chopped | 2 cups cheddar cheese, shredded |
| 2 medium ripe tomatoes, thinly sliced | |

Melt butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat and saute zucchini, onion and green pepper for 3-5 minutes. Add the tomatoes and corn, reduce heat to medium and continue cooking for an additional 5 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Season with dill, salt and pepper. Sprinkle with shredded cheese, cover and simmer for 10 minutes, or until cheese is melted.



Cauliflower Medley

Submitted by Lynne L. Davis, Egyptian Electric Cooperative Association

Servings: 8

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1 head cauliflower, cut into 1-1/2-inch florets | 2 cloves garlic, minced |
| 1 red onion, diced | 1 tablespoon soy sauce |
| 1 red bell pepper, chopped into 3/4-inch pieces | 1 tablespoon olive oil |
| 1 green bell pepper, chopped into 3/4-inch pieces | 1/2 teaspoon salt |
| 3 carrots, peeled and chopped into 3/4-inch pieces | 1/2 teaspoon black pepper |
| | 1 teaspoon dried oregano |
| | 1/2 teaspoon dried basil |
| | 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme |

Preheat the oven to 375 F. Combine the ingredients and stir to coat everything with the oil and seasonings. Spray two baking sheets with cooking spray. Spread out the vegetables in a single layer. Roast for about 25 minutes or until the vegetables are tender and begin to brown around the edges. Stir halfway through roasting.





Get a head start on spring

Bring bulbs inside this winter

WINTER CAN BE A challenge for gardeners who love getting dirt under their fingernails. This year, bring the garden indoors by experimenting with blooming bulbs.

Forcing bulbs indoors is a simple technique that mimics natural conditions, encouraging bulbs to bloom inside rather than in the garden. It is easy to do and makes an enjoyable winter activity for gardeners of all experience levels. Whether you are a seasoned grower or just getting started, forcing bulbs can brighten your home and keep your green thumb active throughout the winter.

Spring-flowering bulbs such as daffodils, tulips and crocuses require a prolonged cold period to rest and develop strong roots before blooming. Depending on the species, these bulbs typically need 12 to 18 weeks of cold temperatures to flower successfully.

Fortunately, there are two popular types of bulbs that do not require a chilling period and are exceptionally easy to grow indoors. With a little preparation, you can enjoy colorful blooms in your home weeks before spring arrives.

Paperwhites

Paperwhites are among the easiest bulbs to force and require little care. Start by purchasing bulbs from a local garden center or online

retailer. After planting, expect blooms within four to six weeks.

Choose a clear container that is 3 to 4 inches deep and does not have drainage holes. Decorative glass containers, bowls or plastic cups work well. Fill the container about three-quarters full of small stones, pebbles or colorful marbles. Place the bulb on top with the roots facing downward, then add water until it just reaches the bottom of the bulb.

Set the container in a warm, sunny location and check the water level regularly, refilling as needed. Within two weeks, roots and green shoots should begin to emerge. Once flower buds start to open, move the container to a cooler area of your home to extend the bloom period. The clusters of star-shaped flowers provide a touch of natural beauty and fill the room with a sweet, musky fragrance.

Amaryllis

Amaryllis bulbs are another excellent choice for indoor winter blooms and are commonly sold in kits that include a pot and growing medium. If planting your own, select a container with drainage holes that is 1 to 2 inches wider than the bulb.

Plant the bulb so the top third remains above the soil surface. Water thoroughly after planting and

place the pot in a warm, sunny location. Allow the top 2 inches of soil to dry before watering again.

Tall flower stalks will emerge within six weeks, producing large, colorful blooms in shades of red, pink and white, as well as striped varieties. To prolong flowering, move the plant out of direct sunlight once blooms appear. Rotating the pot occasionally can help prevent the flower stalk from leaning toward the light.

After flowering, remove the spent blooms and place the plant back in a sunny location. Once the flower stalk begins to yellow, cut it off at the base and continue growing the foliage. Fertilize every two to three weeks to help replenish the bulb's energy reserves.

After the danger of frost has passed in spring, the amaryllis can be moved outdoors for the summer. Before fall frost arrives, bring the bulb indoors, stop watering and store it in a cool, dark location for eight to 12 weeks. When new growth appears, return it to a sunny location, resume watering and enjoy another season of blooms.

Paperwhites and amaryllis provide beautiful blooms with minimal effort, making them perfect for brightening holiday tables, windowsills and living spaces. Give bulb forcing a try this winter, and enjoy a little piece of spring long before the snow melts. 🌱



Brittnay Haag is a Horticulture Educator for the University of Illinois Extension serving Livingston, McLean and Woodford counties. Her work focuses on youth horticulture education through school gardens and Jr. Master Gardener programs.



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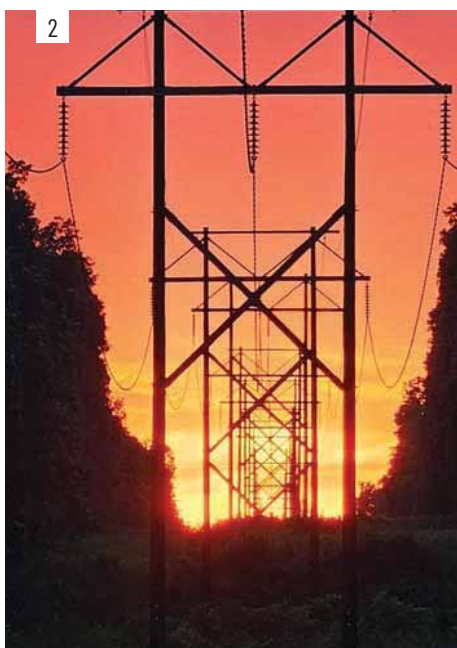
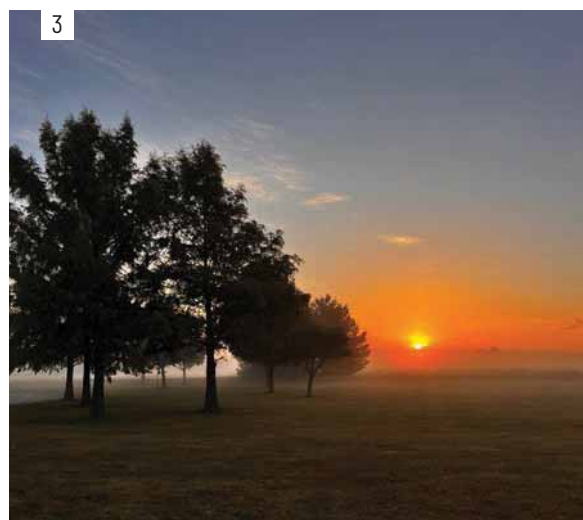
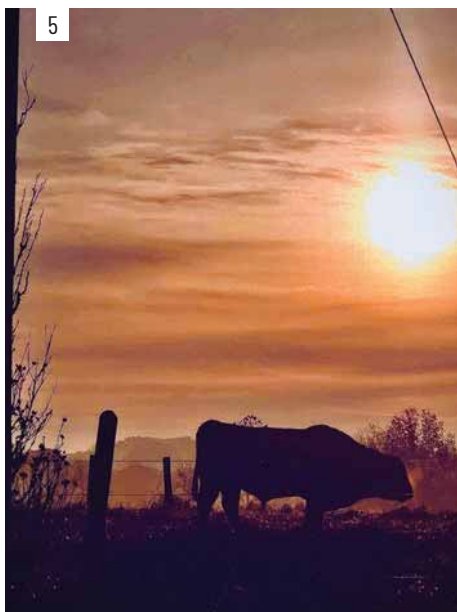
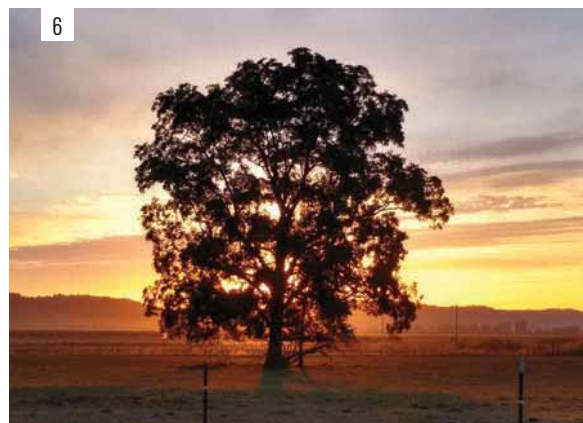
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