Battlefield Biodiversity

Prairie Nymph

The Value of Small Parks

Established as a lasting memorial to commemorate the Vicksburg Campaign, the rough terrain of high bluffs, ridges, and ravines in Vicksburg National Military Park can be attributed to the region's unique loess soil, and is one of the few places where the Mississippi River touched the valley wall. The park has become a place of natural beauty, providing quality habitat for many plants and animals. Over 300 species of vascular plants have been documented in the park, the most significant being the Prairie Nymph (*Herbertia lahue*), a designated Mississippi Species of Special Concern. This small iris thrives in open grassland, exemplifying the benefits of removal of forest vegetation in several areas to improve the cultural and historical viewshed. And, while enjoying the beauty of the wildflowers through the park, a visitor may encounter a Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*) or catch
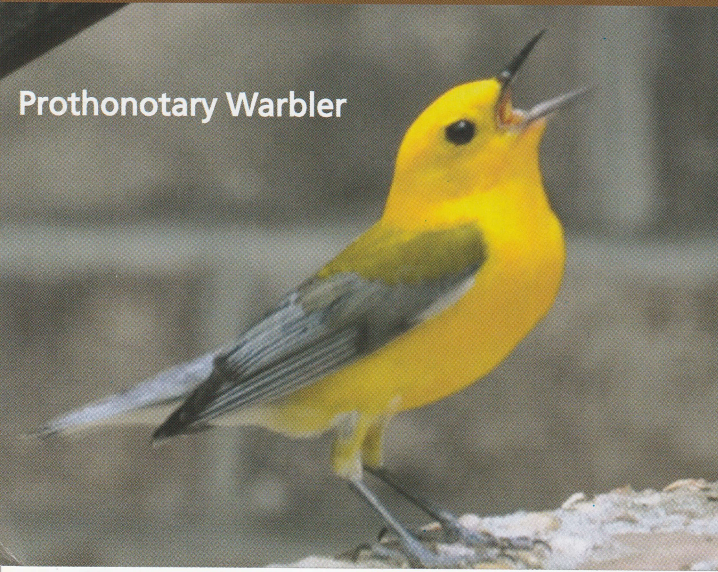
a glimpse of the Golden Silk Spider (*Nephila clavipes*) weaving its web of golden threads. Bird-watching in the park could turn up the colorful Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) in the woodland border along the tour road, or Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*), common in the transitional habitats between the woodlands and open grasslands.
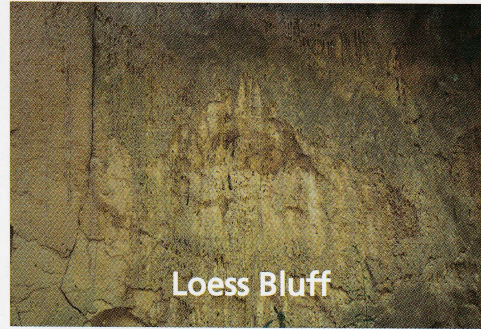
Giant Swallowtail

Golden Silk Spider

Prothonotary Warbler

Eastern Bluebird
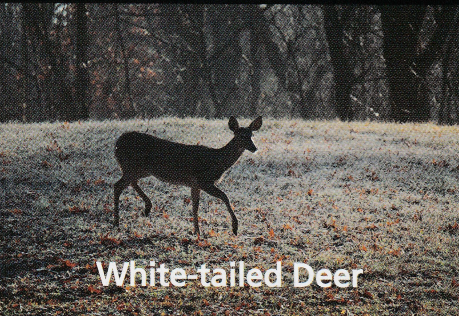
Confederate Avenue ca. 1903

Loess Bluff

Mississippi Kite

In 1899, Vicksburg National Military Park was designated to commemorate the campaign, siege and defense of Vicksburg during the American Civil War. Comprised of an open, formerly agrarian landscape with few trees, and a unique loess soil ridge-and-ravine habitat, the park spans the boundary between two physiographic regions and is characterized by deep, highly erodible loess bluffs that support unique mesic hardwood forests. These forests function as an ecotone between the moist bottomland hardwood forests within the floodplain of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and the well-drained upland forests that dominate the Southeastern Coastal Plain. This habitat is home to many bird species including the Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), and has warranted recognition as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society.

Backdrop to the Battlefield
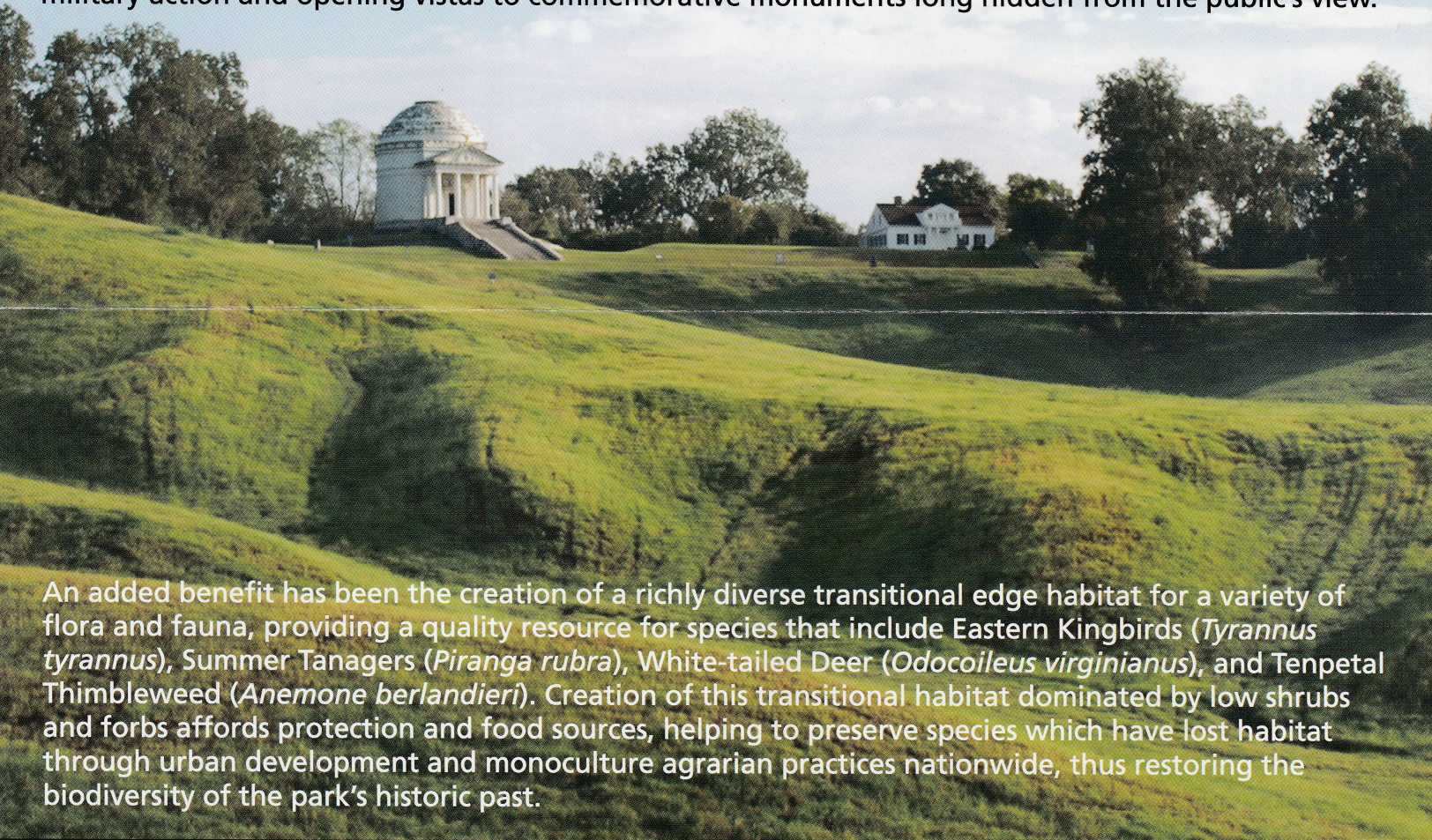

White-tailed Deer

Eastern Kingbird

Summer Tanager

Tenpetal Thimbleweed

During the 1863 campaign, much of the forest within the boundaries of present-day Vicksburg National Military Park was cleared. Lack of adequate vegetative cover left the loess soil exposed and

vulnerable to erosion to such an extent that the Civilian Conservation Corps planted trees on slopes and ravines in the park during the 1930s. Although forests now dominate much of the park's landscape, park personnel realize that the CCC's effort was only partially successful. Current technologies now enable us to maintain soil stability without intensive tree planting, mainly through the use of resilient and quick-growing grasses. Management practices at Vicksburg National Military Park make use of these grasses to return specific areas to their historic viewsheds present at the time of the 1863 conflict. The recently completed battlefield restoration project removed 90 acres of woodland vegetation, exposing historic terrain features germane to interpretation of the area's military action and opening vistas to commemorative monuments long hidden from the public's view.

An added benefit has been the creation of a richly diverse transitional edge habitat for a variety of flora and fauna, providing a quality resource for species that include Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*), Summer Tanagers (*Piranga rubra*), White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), and Tenpetal Thimbleweed (*Anemone berlandieri*). Creation of this transitional habitat dominated by low shrubs and forbs affords protection and food sources, helping to preserve species which have lost habitat through urban development and monoculture agrarian practices nationwide, thus restoring the biodiversity of the park's historic past.