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Take Care of the Forest Preserves, So They Can Take Care of You

“It’s literally the only place we can go.”

Here at Friends of the Forest Preserves, we are hearing from our members, volunteers, and staff how thankful people are to have the forest preserves in Cook County as a place to take a peaceful walk, breathe in some fresh air, and relieve some anxiety about the crisis unfolding around us. The parking lots and trails are bursting with more people than we can remember. It’s because the preserves offer an endless source of wonder and inspiration, with over 300 miles of trails to explore and open space for our kids to play. Covering 11% of the Cook County region, the forest preserves offer us all the opportunity to enjoy expansive landscapes as well as smaller pockets of woods, rivers, lakes, and prairies, so close to home.

We appreciate the commitment made by the Forest Preserves of Cook County, under the leadership of President Toni Preckwinkle and Superintendent Arnold Randall, to keeping the preserves safe during this time.

Most of the forest preserves in Cook County remain open, although the nature centers, the popular “Stairs” at Swallow Cliff Woods, and all restrooms are closed. But please make no mistake: overcrowding will result in more site closures, similar to those that we have already seen happen with the lakefront and the 606 trail. Overuse will also cause damage to the very plants and animals among which we seek solace.

The people of Cook County have always played a vital role in caring for the preserves - through volunteering, advocacy, and partnerships. It is now up to us to care for them even more during this time of intensified use. In order to ensure the safety of everyone, please follow - and share - the following guidelines:

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*Stay home if you are sick.

*Whether you are running, biking, flying kites, or bird watching, maintain a six foot distance from other visitors. Teach the little ones to pull off to the side of the trail to let others pass.

*Visit during the least busy times. The forest preserves are open from dawn to dusk, so try to visit in the early morning or later in the evening.

*Explore some of the less popular or more remote sections of the preserves. If a parking lot is near capacity, find a different site or come back another time.

*Follow the rules of the preserves: keep dogs leashed; do not trample, forage, pick flowers or collect firewood; ride only on designated biking trails; and please do not feed the deer or the ducks (no matter how cute they are).

*Keep your visits short and sweet. Go for your hike, walk, or run - and then go home. Remember that the bathrooms are closed, so only plan to stay as long as your bladder can hold.

* Avoid any risky or new activities that would require a first responder or forest preserve staff support.

*Throw away your garbage and don't leave anything else behind. Even better, throw on those vinyl gloves and pick up some litter. Best practice would be to bring trash home to help limit exposure of maintenance staff.

*Call 708.771.1000 to report overcrowding or damage.

*Sign up to volunteer when restrictions are lifted.

Our treasured forest preserves are here for us now, and they will see us through many challenges ahead. Friends of the Forest Preserves is hopeful that the current surge in visitors will result in more advocates and visitors, expanded resources, and increased protection for the forest preserves well into the future.

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Friends of the Forest Preserves unites people to protect, promote, and care for the forest preserves in Cook County. As an independent nonprofit organization solely focused on the forest preserves in Cook County, we work tirelessly to safeguard and improve the 70,000 acres of forest preserves for all of us and generations to come. Founded in 1998 by a small group of concerned citizens, the Friends community is now a force of thousands working together to ensure that land, water, and life will always thrive in the forest preserves.

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