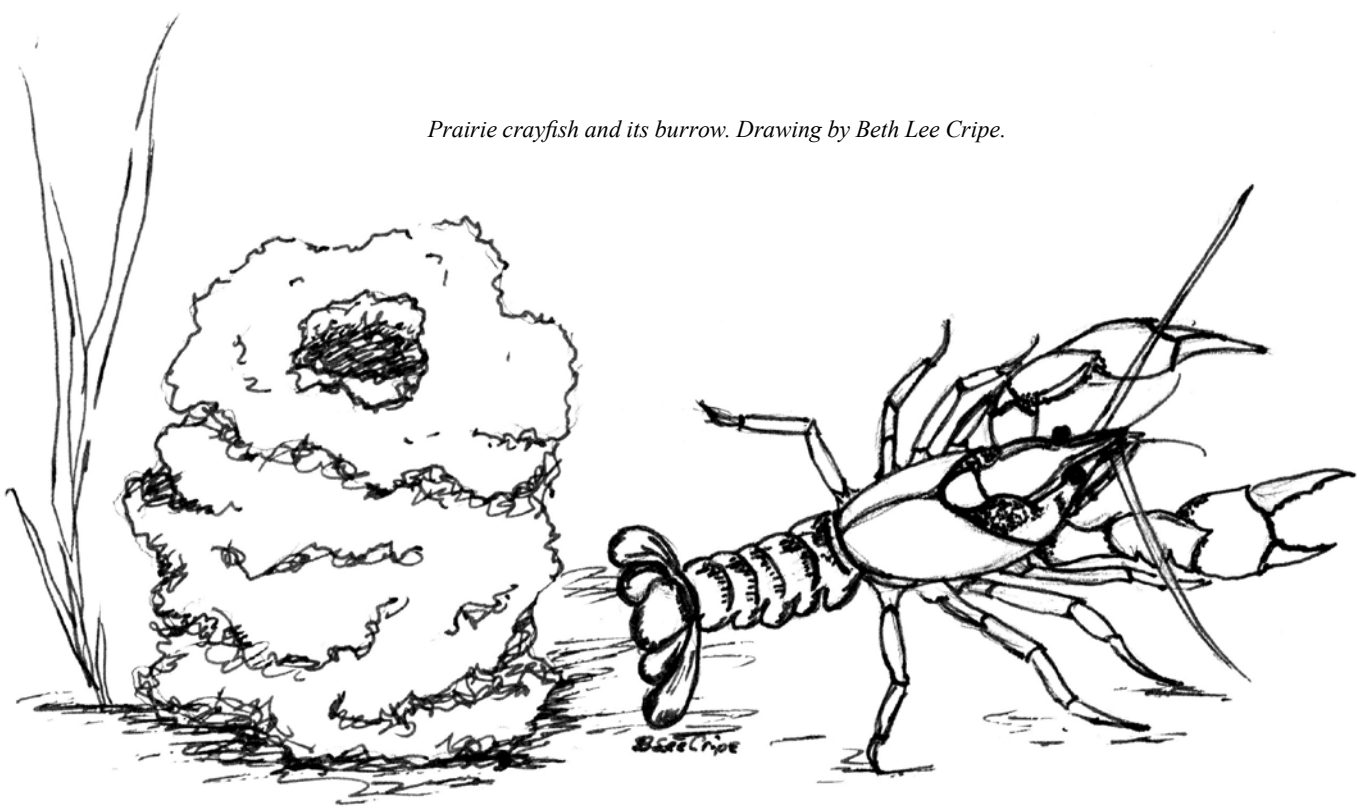


Prairie crayfish and its burrow. Drawing by Beth Lee Cripe.



Notable Natives

Prairie Crayfish

Near the creek behind my childhood home, my friends and I often found small volcano-shaped mounds of clay made by crawfish as they excavated their tunnels. (Crawfish, crayfish, crawdad or mudbug – it’s all the same although the term crawfish was used first – in 1817.) We never saw the creatures that built the mounds because crawfish are active mostly at night when they come out to eat and be eaten.

These freshwater relatives of the lobster are an important part of the diets of wading birds, fish, raccoons, turtles, frogs and snakes. In turn, they are efficient scavengers, eating carrion and plants as well as live insects, snails and small fish.

Crawfish breathe with gills, so most live in permanent bodies of water – from small creeks and ponds to large rivers and lakes. However, three species in the Chicago area inhabit wet prairies and marshes. They maintain access to water by digging burrows to below the water table, sometimes as deep as six feet. The most common of these burrowers is *Procambarus gracilis*, or grassland crayfish, whose mounds can be seen on CFC preserves.

Adult grassland crayfish are two to three inches long. They are rusty brown in color and have powerful pincers used to defend themselves, capture food and excavate burrows. Like all crawfish, the grassland species has a large number of appendages in addition to the pincers,

including four pairs of walking legs – two with small nippers and two without, a pair of eye stalks and several pairs of “feelers,” “jaw feet” and swimmerets. The animal’s flexible, jointed abdomen ends in a flaring tail. When in water, it can use its tail to move rapidly backwards away from danger.

In northeastern Illinois, the female prairie crawfish lays eggs in February and March. She carries her 100 to 200 fertilized eggs attached to the swimmerets under her abdomen. The young hatch after a month or two and remain attached to mom for another month, until they are big enough to fend for themselves. As they grow to adult size, a process that takes more than a year, they repeatedly shed their shells and grow new, larger ones. Grassland crayfish can live for three to four years.

These crayfish are important members of the prairie ecosystem providing burrows in which other animals can hibernate in winter and in which some may find refuge. Prairie and wetland species like the Massasauga and Kirtland’s snakes likely use these burrows.

The Illinois Natural History Survey suggests two main things people can do to promote the health of Illinois crayfish populations. The first is to conserve and restore aquatic environments as CFC is doing. The second is never to release crayfish into a body of water other than the one from which they came. This keeps aggressive outsiders from taking over the territories of species with limited ranges.

— Linda Novak