

The Acadian flycatcher is one of several threatened bird species seen at the property of Ellen Brooks and Dave Hackett in Crawford County.

Conservancy Notes

FALL 2020

Photo by Gwyn Calvetti.

Wildlife corridor expanded in Crawford County

Ellen Brooks and Dave Hackett have lived a sheltered life for some 40 years – sheltered by the woods and east-facing hill that rises from the homesite on their 37-acre property near Gays Mills. Sheltered as well has been the wildlife that dwells in this area of “continental ecological significance,” according to the state’s Wildlife Action Plan. The oak woodlands on their land provide habitat for many trees and other plants as well as the state-threatened hooded warbler, cerulean warbler, and Acadian flycatcher, according to a study of the property by Mississippi Valley Conservancy staff.

Ellen and Dave have decided to make that habitat sheltering permanent with a conservation agreement with the Conservancy. The agreement, a conservation easement, provides permanent protection from future residential development, subdivision, or mining of the property.

Dave said he takes pleasure in the way the land, an entire draw, has both north- and south-facing slopes – red oak on the north-facing slope and white oak on the drier south-facing slope. “I like being held by nature,” he

said with a smile. He noted that the land above them is being managed, some of it restored to prairie, by the

Wisconsin DNR as part of the Kickapoo River Wildlife Area.

Abbie Church, our conservation director, said protection of the land is significant because it expands a wildlife corridor with the adjacent state-owned land and other lands protected by the Conservancy, some 2,300 acres of contiguous protected habitat that will help wildlife in a time of climate change.

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Ellen Brooks and Dave Hackett at the closing of their conservation easement in Crawford County in August of 2020. Photo by Krysten Strong.

A message from Carol Abrahamzon

Connections that last a lifetime.



I wanted to share with you something I've been thinking about a lot: a way in which we can all come together and make our community stronger, kinder, and more resilient.

Not too long ago I was picking fall raspberries. I thought back to when I was a kid, picking berries with Mom and Grandma, and the joy of making pies and jams together. I remember the bees, the birds, and the wind across the fields. I felt, as a kid, that those very ordinary days would go on forever.

Yet, if I've learned anything this year, it's that the little things matter. The seemingly ordinary day of picking raspberries becomes something to share with my own grandchildren. The walk in the woods with my friends or family is now a treasured way to connect. The time spent outside after dinner, listening to the birds, or watching the full moon slowly ascend from the horizon provides a sense of peace and calm.

We know from research that children often fall in love with nature and farms through the everyday, ordinary experiences of being outdoors, the same way you and I did as kids. For many, it's this time outside that provides the joy and stability we all need to face an uncertain world. It's also the future of conservation, as people conserve what they cherish.

If ever there was a time to come together and find the common around us, it is now. This coming year, with your support and partnership, we'll work with local families to establish new public nature preserves and conserve critical wildlife areas and farms to bring joy to kids and adults alike. Together, we'll ensure that everyone has the opportunity to find those links to nature and farms that create lasting connections to the land, our families and friends, and our communities.

That's a gift that gives me such joy. Thank you.

Together in conservation,

Carol



Water quality is important to Ellen & Dave, who protect their springs and creek with perennial vegetation.

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Ellen and Dave love exploring and working on their land. One of their favorite features is a spring about a quarter mile back in the woods. It flows downhill for a while and then disappears back into the ground. Even the work of managing the land – like removing invasive species such as multiflora rose or garlic mustard – has never been a difficult task, according to Dave.

For years the couple has monitored water quality in the Halls Branch trout stream nearby. Ellen is vice president of the Crawford Stewardship Project, which works to protect the area from pollution threats of extractive industries and to preserve the beauty and natural resources of the county and area.

More details on all the stories in this newsletter can be found in the *Wild Reads Blog* on our website at www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org.

Photo of spring by Abbie Church. Photo of Carol Abrahamzon by Drake Hokanson.

Natural Climate Solutions: Prairie Strips



Vernon County farmer protects soil with prairie strips

Forty-three years ago, David and Betty Van Dyke passed through Wisconsin's Driftless Area while visiting David's sister in La Crescent. Both were so struck by the uniqueness and beauty of the area that soon afterward they made it their home. They purchased a 114-acre farm within the Bad Axe River watershed, 7 miles southwest of Viroqua.

Not only did David and Betty raise their family as active members of the Viroqua community, but throughout the years they have offered thoughtful, ecologically responsible stewardship to the land that they love.

One part of this stewardship has been the Van Dykes' use of strategically placed native prairie plantings called prairie strips within crop fields as a conservation practice.

According to the work done through the Iowa State University STRIPS program (Science-based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips), the strips deliver enormous soil, water, and nutrient benefits while increasing wildlife habitat. The strips, a mix of native grasses and flowers, are generally planted around or through a field, alongside a waterway, or in a terrace channel.

One way prairie strips improve the resilience of the land is by reducing soil erosion. The deep roots and stiff, upright stems of native prairie plants slow surface runoff and hold soil in place. Even small patches of prairie provide diversity and erosion control that offer greater resilience to a wide

variety of climatic events, including heavy rainfall, flooding, and drought.

Convinced by the research and the increased biodiversity of their land since they started planting prairie strips in 2017, they have continued planting more strips each year. Their work with prairie strips has been supported in part by Valley Stewardship Network (VSN), which provided the seed mix to David through a grant. The Van Dyke farm serves as a site for VSN's On-Farm Stewardship Research Project, which studies their contribution to soil protection and quality, water infiltration, and bird/pollinator habitat.

Today, David leases most of his cropland, and he continues working hard to remove all invasive species from the land. His goal is no weeds. "I would like to see it the way it was 20 years ago when I was farming the land."

Above: David Van Dyke and a field assistant prepare to inspect their croplands that contain prairie strips. The Van Dykes are pursuing an easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy to ensure the wildlife and habitat of their property, and their farming legacy, will remain beyond their lifetime.

Planting prairie strips on agricultural land now qualifies for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service EQIP program. Grant funding may also be available through Valley Stewardship Network. For more information, contact Dave Krier, Water Quality & Citizen Science Coordinator at VSN: dave@valleystewardshipnetwork.org

Photos by Tom Rhorer



Above, Catherine Worley of Monarch Joint Venture and Jon Rigden of Friends of the Blufflands survey plants on plots of land being studied in the La Crosse Blufflands for the second consecutive year. The ongoing study includes locations in ten Midwestern states. **Visit the Nature Preserves section of our website for information about visiting the La Crosse Blufflands.**

Monarch habitat research includes prairie in La Crosse Blufflands

Everyone loves monarch butterflies. These amazing insects inspire awe and admiration with their incredible journey of migration from Mexico and back each year. Some of those monarchs end up in Wisconsin.

Sadly, the monarch population has been declining over the last two decades. The average size of the population in the last decade is only roughly a third of the average size in the '90s. This decline is largely attributed to habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation, but there are other threats, including pesticide use and climate change. We've lost significant amounts of milkweed and floral resources across the landscape due to changing agricultural practices and development. Scientists estimate that in the Midwest alone, roughly 860 million milkweed stems have been lost since 1999.

On Monday, August 3, a team from the Monarch Joint Venture (MJV) studied a small patch of bluffland that's owned and managed by the City of La Crosse and protected by the Conservancy – a place that some monarchs visit annually. Catherine Worley and Meghan Slocombe from MJV made up this year's team. They found the area to study using GPS coordinates, carefully staked out two 200-by-50-meter plots, and meticulously counted the number of monarch

Monarch butterfly photo by Bruce Bartel. Field research photos by Tom Rhoer.

butterflies, caterpillars, and eggs found on their host plant, the milkweeds. They then counted the number of milkweed plants as well as all the other surrounding prairie flowers and recorded them to give a complete description of this postage stamp of habitat.

This is the second year this specific plot of land has been studied with the hope that this data from the protected La Crosse Blufflands combined with that from many other sites will help researchers in their efforts to support and save this wonder of nature. On the plots they surveyed, they observed 32 blooming and 15 non-blooming plant species. On the 35 stems of milkweed surveyed, the team saw 8 monarch eggs, and two first instars (larvae). During the entire duration of their site visit they saw three adult monarchs.

It is important to note that this site has not always been such inviting habitat for monarchs. In 2017, a pollinator prairie was planted by the City of La Crosse, with support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wisconsin DNR, Friends of the Blufflands, and Mississippi Valley Conservancy, with a mix of native prairie flowers and grasses, turning a barren quarry into a teeming oasis, providing much-needed habitat for monarchs, birds, and many other species. It is hoped that this prairie and others like it along with data collected by MJV, with funding from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, will help save the magnificent monarch. Thank you MJV for all your efforts! For more information about MJV and monarchs, visit www.monarchjointventure.org.



The MJV field technicians used a white PVC frame to survey plant species in small areas and then extrapolated findings to the larger area of study.

Endangered bumble bees photobomb monarch habitat study



When Jon Rigden, from Friends of the Blufflands, and photographer Tom Rhoer volunteered to meet up with the researchers from Monarch Joint Venture in the La Crosse Blufflands in August, we expected them to come back with news about monarch butterflies. But just a few hours later, they were emailing and texting with photos of 8 or more rusty patched bumble bees!

The rusty patched bumble bee is extremely rare in Wisconsin and is considered both state- and globally-imperiled. The rust-colored patch, surrounded by yellow on the bee's abdomen, is the most obvious identifier and gives this bumble bee its name. The females have a black area of hairs at the back on the head (the vertex), whereas the males have a yellow vertex. The queen has a black vertex and two yellow segments on the abdomen with no rusty patch.

Bumble Bee Brigade, coordinated by the Wisconsin DNR, was formed to improve understanding, management, and conservation of Wisconsin bumble bees, and it uses volunteers to monitor native bumble bees. For more information about the program and to learn how you can participate in this project, visit www.wiatri.net/inventory/BBB/.

Rusty patched bumble bee photo by Jon Rigden.

Volunteer for the wild!



Anyone can help protect land, water, and climate by volunteering with the Conservancy. We have indoor projects and outdoor projects that include habitat restoration, special events assistance, mailings, graphic design, photography and more. And volunteering is a great way to meet more people like you!

By signing up on our website, you can indicate your interests so we can reach out to you when we have volunteer opportunities that match your interests. There's no obligation for signing up – it simply lets us know what you might be interested in doing and helps prevent us from sending too many emails.

www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer



Successive landowners renew commitment to conservation

Cub Scout pack leader Bob Tenwinkel heard about a possible site for the home he was hoping to build during a Cub Scout picnic he attended with his sons in Holmen in 2018. One of the other dads who knew he was looking for a place said he knew of a fellow who knew a fellow looking to sell about 250 acres of woods and blufftop between Onalaska and Holmen.

And soon, Tenwinkel and his wife, Erin Donlin, with their love of trees and wildlife, became the third owners of a property protected from development by conservation easements with the Conservancy. Tenwinkel said he appreciated that the process of ensuring the construction of their new home would fit within the parameters of the easement terms was a smooth one.

In 2009, George and Sharon Kerckhove worked with the Conservancy to establish a conservation easement on 200 acres they owned to protect the land and habitat from encroaching development. In 2011, Heather and Charles Nolte purchased the Kerckhove property and subsequently purchased an additional 40 adjoining acres which they protected with an additional easement. In September of 2018, Bob and Erin purchased both the Kerckhove and Nolte tracts from the Noltes and became a part of the history of these lands, which are protected forever.

Soon after the purchase, Abbie Church, our conservation director, walked the property with Tenwinkel. "We were delighted to learn about the river birch and other species of vegetation and wildlife during the hike with Abbie," said Tenwinkel, who's a big fan of trees, "It's also been great to learn more through the annual monitoring process with other Conservancy staff, especially as I've taken on the challenge of eliminating invasive plant species on the property."

We're heartened to see this family take the conservation torch and run with it!



Erin Donlin and Bob Tenwinkel with their sons, Andrew and Matthew, at their blufftop property in the Town of Onalaska. The boys have already determined where they plan to build forts, and Bob says he'd be interested in protecting more land nearby should it become available in the future.

The unabridged version of this landowner succession story is available on our website in the Wild Reads blog.

Photo of family by Dave Skoloda.

Stronger Together

Join us for Mississippi Valley Conservancy's 23rd Annual Fall Fundraiser!

5:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 13, 2020

This live event will take place online so you can hear the latest Conservancy news, bid in the LIVE auction, and enjoy local music in the comfort of your home.

Together, we'll celebrate all you've done and all we will do together for the future.

Watch for your invitation with details coming soon!

Tax update for charitable giving

Although required minimum distributions (RMDs) are waived for 2020, you can still use your IRA funds to get a tax break when giving to a charity. If you plan to give a gift to Mississippi Valley Conservancy anyway, the best way is to do it with a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) from your IRA. The funds are directly transferred from your IRA to a the Conservancy and the IRA income is then excluded from your taxable income. The tax benefit still applies even though there is no RMD requirement this year. Only traditional and Roth IRA owners and beneficiaries who are age 70½ or older qualify for this tax break. If a QCD is not in your future, then take advantage of the new \$300 above-the-line charitable deduction created for this tax year.

This material has been prepared for informational purposes only, and is not intended to provide, and should not be relied on for, tax, legal or accounting advice. You should consult your own tax, legal and accounting advisors before engaging in any transaction. Photo courtesy of A. B. Sheldon.



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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, non-profit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 21,146 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, and streams in and around the Mississippi, Kickapoo, and Wisconsin Rivers since its founding in 1997. Over 5,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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Now is the time to build *your* resilience!



As we're all learning, resilience is the name of the game these days. And getting outdoors is one of the most enjoyable and safe ways to build and maintain your mental and physical well-being. Need a little inspiration?

The best days of hiking in Wisconsin's Driftless Area have arrived, so it's a great time to sign up for the *Trail Trek Challenge*. It's a free program and it goes on year-round, so it's never too late to get started. If you complete 5 easy hikes and submit your hike log, you could even be a winner in our prize drawing!

There's so much to see out there right now! Birds are migrating, the prairies are still abuzz with pollinators, monarchs are passing through, and the leaves have started to change colors. If you're lucky, you might even find some berries or mushrooms while you're out exploring the nature preserves.

Today is a great day to get started at: www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc