

# Conservancy Notes

SPRING 2021

## La Crosse County couple “repays debt” to the land

**W**ill Agger paused at the sound of a barred owl hooting nearby. He cupped his hands over his mouth and vocalized a credible imitation of the owl’s ‘who-cooks-for-you’ call. “I didn’t want him to think he had the place all to himself,” he said before heading on down the trail among tall pines and oaks that skirted the edge of his property along the Black River north of Holmen. He was probably smiling, but he was

wearing a mask, so I can’t say for sure. Agger, a retired infectious disease physician, wore a Mossy Oak camo fleece, khaki cargo pants, wide-brimmed camo hat with a feather, and well-worn hiking boots. He’s a bow hunter and long-time member and former board member of Mississippi Valley Conservancy.



He was giving me a tour of the 55-acre property that he and his wife, Peggy, a retired UW-La Crosse student health nurse, had just protected with a donated conservation easement with the Conservancy.  
(continued on page 3)

*The Aggers reconstructed an 1850s cabin for use by Will’s mother as an art studio. There, she created copper sculptures inspired by the woodland flowers and native grass prairie.*



## What You Do Matters – Who You Do It For Matters More

I spend a great deal of time here on the farm growing, harvesting, and preserving most of the food we eat. In the past, I thought I did this for me because I want to know how my food is grown, where it comes from, and how it is cared for. I want to “slow down” in a fast-paced world. But as I was preparing dinner recently I realized I really do all of this for the person who matters most to me – Bill, my husband. Running the farm, growing our food, and making and eating that food with Bill are acts of love and compassion.

This makes me think about our community’s land conservation efforts across the Driftless Area. Just think of the joy that time in the woods, on the farm, or wandering through a prairie has brought you. Yet conservation is for more than our own satisfaction; it too is an act of love and compassion, an act of generosity and of unending hope – for those you’ve never met, including those who have little voice as to what their future brings. You are helping to save spaces for all living things.

Together we save oak savannas for the red-headed woodpecker pair that raises its young there; we clear past prairies of red cedars to bring them back to life. Together, we pull another bag of garlic mustard, and plant a few thousand trees.

As the world speeds up, we are finding ways to slow down, to bring nature close to home, and to ensure that people from all walks of life, feel safe and welcome in nature. Conservation is a gift to all of us – and when we do it well, it lifts those who need it most.

Like the farm and the dinners I share with Bill, this is not a solo path or journey. Together we are learning about climate change, how to care for the land, and why what we do matters for our children, grandchildren and those we will never know.

What you do matters, but who you do it for – who *we* do it for – matters more, for the land, water, air, and all living things while there’s still time.

Together in conservation,

*Carol Abrahamzon*

Carol Abrahamzon,  
Executive Director



Pasqueflower photo courtesy of William Petersen



easements to fit a property’s unique features while also ensuring the wishes of the owners,” according to Chris Kirkpatrick, MVC conservation specialist.

Will and his father found this property when they visited from the Chicago area on a successful bow hunting trip in 1972. They saw a scrap of white paper tacked on a post along Highway T saying simply FOR SALE with a phone number. They hiked the property and discovered it full of deer and grouse, and it was on the river. They called the number and bought it.

As we walked recently, we heard grouse drumming and the croak of

a raven in an area where the Aggers have found evidence of a Native American habitation site. Will explained that the family borrowed a Ho-Chunk term for dark water as a name for the property: Neosheprah.

Over the decades, the Agger family has managed the property through the state’s Managed Forest Law program, hunted, hiked, launched their canoes, and skied on the property, which also includes sandstone cliffs, forested seeps, moist cliffs, springs, a creek, a wetland, and a flood-plain forest.

“I have now watched Mississippi Valley Conservancy grow into a very successful conservancy which has enormously enriched the esthetic and cultural value of our area. The Aggers are delighted to do our small part and that Neoshepra has now been protected by the Conservancy,” Will said.

*Written by Dave Skoloda*

### La Crosse County couple *(cover story)*

“The land has been part of the family since 1972 and has given us much enjoyment by sharing its interesting animals, complex flora, and beautiful scenery, now for nearly a half-century. That giving deserves to be – must be – repaid. It is a debt,” he said in response to a question regarding why they chose to protect it.

While conserving the wild beauty along 1,000 feet of the Black River, a popular canoe route, the Aggers have carefully considered its future. They have specified in their conservation easement that it would be possible for the Conservancy or some other organization to provide a canoe access on the property at a future time.

“Crafting the easement to allow for this unique public benefit in the future demonstrates the flexibility of conservation

*Over the years, the Aggers have sighted several birds on the property that are species of special concern including the golden-winged warbler, northern goshawk, and prothonotary warbler. They’ve also seen the state threatened timber rattlesnake (below). Above, Will views the property from a wooded ridge (photo by Chris Kirkpatrick).*

**A FAVORITE STORY OF WILL AGGER’S:** “There are two bluffs on the property. My mother felt one of them, with a sandstone face, needed a memorable name, so she picked ‘Rattlesnake Bluff’ without ever having seen a rattlesnake anywhere on the property. Nor did any of us until one fall day, long after Mom’s passing, I was hiking below that bluff, when I nearly stepped on an interesting baby snake. Being a zoologist at heart, I stooped over to pick it up, then paused, just inches from its head to my fingers, recalling Mom’s name for the location. Something was not right for it to be a recently hatched bull snake. So, using a stick, I brushed off a leaf to expose its tail. There was a button rattle of a Massasauga! Trembling, I stepped back, watched the snake slide away, and thanked Mom for her choice in the location’s name.”



*Photo courtesy of Allen Blake Sheldon*



## Birds of a feather protect land together in Vernon County

Joan and Kurt Peterson were both drawn to Wisconsin's Driftless Area as an ideal place to immerse themselves in nature during their retirement years. When they found a 40-acre parcel of beautifully forested property just outside of La Farge, it didn't take long for them to know it was the right place to call home. Now, ten years later, they have permanently protected their parcel of heaven with Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

Their property is home to diverse native habitats, including limestone bluffs, mixed forest, and a sedge meadow with a creek running through it. A handful of exposed dry cliffs are also found on the land, providing crevices in

which wildlife find shelter. Kurt and Joan actively manage their forest to help maintain a diversity of native trees for their beloved birds. Four native species of oaks are found here – home to over 500 species of insects, that provide an essential source of food for early migrants and breeding birds.

Conservancy stewardship associate Krysten Zummo said, "As our climate continues to shift, pushing species further north and higher in elevation, properties with this kind of habitat diversity play an important role by providing space for native plants and animals to adapt."

Joan and Kurt are active birders and are citizen-scientists who report their sightings to programs that track and record bird populations, such as eBird and Project Feeder-Watch. Their land is situated within the Kickapoo Valley Reserve - Wildcat Mountain Important Bird Area – an area of focus for the Kickapoo Bird Habitat Initiative for habitat management, data collection, and public education.

The Petersons built their new home with great consideration for the environment. The siting and design maximize the use of natural light and passive solar gain, the home is heated with a geothermal system, and they chose local materials and fixtures as much as possible. To help offset their carbon footprint, they invested in two off-site solar panels with their local renewable energy cooperative.

Joan and Kurt especially enjoy nurturing habitats for birds that visit and enjoy the nesting boxes and feeders they've provided. They have also planted chokecherry and serviceberry bushes, and they've seeded native prairie plant species in some areas that needed cover.

"We see ourselves as temporary caretakers of this property," says Joan, who says they are inspired by conservationist Aldo Leopold. "We purchased it for the right to enjoy it during our lives." The land is also enjoyed by the Petersons' daughter and granddaughter who live nearby.



Kurt Peterson enjoys a hike to the rock outcropping at their ridgetop. Joan planted wildflowers, including beautiful lupine, around their house to support bumblebees, butterflies, and other pollinators (top). Written by Sarah Bratnaber and Krysten Zummo.



## Join us in making Naturehood Connections

Beginning this summer, we're offering a new opportunity for people living near the Conservancy's La Crosse County nature preserves to learn about and care for those special places. It's phase one of a new grant-funded program called Naturehood Connections.

The past year has seen an increase in traffic on the nature preserves, and they could all use a little extra attention, including invasive species removal, litter collection, and seed gathering. To make it easy for people of all ages to help, we'll be offering training and tool kits you can check out to use when volunteering works for you. The tool kits will include activities for kids so they can do some discovering on their own when they tire of helping the adults with habitat restoration.

In 2021, Naturehood Connections activities will focus on New Amsterdam Grasslands, La Crosse River Conservancy, and one of the Conservancy's La Crosse bluffland properties. We plan to expand the program to nature preserves in other counties in future years.

This pilot program is made possible with generous funding from the La Crosse Community Foundation.

*There's always something new to learn and do at the nature preserves. This young visitor discovered a bird's nest.*

## Volunteer for the wild!

Everyone 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 – signing up simply lets us know what you're interested in doing and prevents us from sending emails you don't want.

[www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer)



Volunteers assist with tree planting at Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area in Grant County on a recent spring day.



## Doctoring the land with “farm kid wisdom”

We’ve been learning with Dave and Betty Van Dyke as they’ve developed and refined the practice of managing their farmland with prairie strips during the past eight years. They’ve also enriched their soil, managed their woodlands, and improved wildlife habitat since moving onto the property forty-three years ago.

Now, after decades of thoughtful and active care for the agricultural and wild resources of the land, they have made their commitment to the land permanent by protecting it with a conservation easement with their local land trust, Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

David and Betty maintain ownership of the land, but the Conservancy accepts responsibility for ensuring the land is not subdivided or developed in the future. Conserving family farms is an important component of the Conservancy’s mission.

*In reflecting on this new protection of their land, Dave commented, “We came to this area over 40 years ago and have created our lives here. Making responsible, ecologically sound choices to improve and preserve the farm has always been an integral part of that process.”*

During their first year on the land, Dave said they had great difficulty plowing because the soil was almost pure clay with no organic matter. Having grown up on a farm, he knew that improving the health of the soils would be mandatory to any successful operation. Twenty years ago, Dave planted trees to hold the soil in place in some of the highly erodible fields that he enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. He knew about tree planting from his days in 4-H. In other fields, he followed the advice of a wise farmer-neighbor by adding lime to the soil and starting crop rotations planted along the contour. Dave and Betty’s most recent endeavor has been to establish strategically placed strips of native prairie plantings within crop fields to conserve soil, water, and nutrients while increasing wildlife and pollinator habitat.

Even with the increase in heavy rains in the Driftless Area, the soils on their farmland have remained stable. According to Ben Wojahn, Vernon County Conservationist, “Keeping land productive and still protected is the most impactful thing farmers and landowners can do.”

The Van Dykes’ land management has extended from the farmland into the surrounding woods which are managed to support area wildlife.

The Van Dykes’ vision and work have all come together to enhance the value of their farm for the future while increasing its climate resilience for all who live here.

*Written by Barb Kruse*

## Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge

With the help of longtime conservation partners like you, over 21,600 acres of prairies, forests, wetlands, streams, and farmlands are being cared for and restored for birds, bees, turtles, and future generations. *But this isn’t enough.*

To prevent loss of land that our furry and feathered friends depend upon for shelter and food, we must protect more land and care for it in a way that builds resilience to the effects of climate change.

To help ensure a safe haven for today’s plants and animals, as well as for generations to come, we invite you to join the Stewardship Circle. It’s a very special group of land conservation supporters who’ve made a lasting promise to the land through a number of estate-planning tools, including gifts in a will or trust, charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, IRA designations, and gifts of life insurance or land.

Right now, you can increase your gift and pledge to land protection in the Driftless Area for today and tomorrow through the Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge.

Two generous couples have created a grant of \$30,000, of which \$1,000 will be added to our working funds for every new Stewardship Circle member. This means your future commitment to saving land can help today!

Thanks to this challenge grant, if you join the Stewardship Circle by including the Conservancy in your will or estate plan today, a donation of \$1,000 will be made to the Conservancy in your honor – right now.



**If you join the Stewardship Circle by including the Conservancy in your will or estate plan today, a donation of \$1,000 will be made to the Conservancy in your honor – right now.**

*For details, visit our website or contact Carol at [carol@mississippivalleyconservancy.org](mailto:carol@mississippivalleyconservancy.org) or by phone at 608-784-3606 ext. 4*



## In memory of a beloved conservation leader

*Jim Czajkowski 1947-2021*

Few people have done as much for land and water as did our longtime friend and board member, Jim Czajkowski. As chair of the Land Protection and Management Committee, he was a leader in conservation on the board as he was in his own community. Jim and his wife, Joyce, protected their farm with a conservation easement in 2009.

We are eternally grateful for all Jim did to protect wildlife habitats and farmlands in the Driftless Area, and for the leadership he demonstrated in maintaining and ensuring the future of his own land for everyone’s benefit. His legacy is an inspiration to all of us.







## Chasing the seasons with habitat restoration

*A spring update from Land Manager Levi Plath*

Our work priorities are determined by a couple of factors. The first is often funding; so the habitat restoration work that we're doing at any given time of year is dependent on grants or cost-share programs that allow us to do the work. Secondly, the work we do is seasonally prioritized. For instance, spring-time is burn season and the beginning of our fight against invasive garlic mustard, whereas in midsummer we're more focused on other invasive species control projects. This is because different invasives grow at different times and are impacted more effectively by different management techniques.

Below is a brief summary of our top habitat restoration priorities for this spring and summer. If it sounds familiar, that's because "these things take time."

**Sugar Creek Bluff:** Prescribed burning in spring followed by garlic mustard control in May/June with other invasive control throughout the summer (wild parsnip, reed canary grass, crown vetch, cut-leaved teasel)

**Tunnelville Cliffs:** Prescribed burning in spring followed by invasive control throughout the summer (wild parsnip, honeysuckle) and savanna restoration through brush clearing in mid to late summer

**Devil's Backbone:** Garlic mustard control in spring

**New Amsterdam Grasslands, Holland Sand Prairie, Wilton Hemlocks:** Prescribed burning in spring (when allowed) after smooth brome grass has leafed out to provide an opportunity for prairie plants to outcompete it.



*Cedar clearing crew at Sugar Creek Bluff in early March 2021.*

## Volunteer Spotlight: Kickapoo Caverns Site Steward



Back in 2017, Ken Cornish saw a request from the Conservancy looking for volunteers to give tours of Kickapoo Caverns in Crawford County. He thought it would be a good way to use his Master Naturalist designation and was soon well-versed on caves and bats. In 2019 he volunteered to be site steward for the entire Kickapoo Caverns property.

"If you'd have asked me about it twenty years ago, this is not what I thought I'd be doing," laughs Ken, a retired chief financial officer for rural hospitals. As site steward he keeps an eye on the property, maintains locks and gates, and monitors field cameras for wildlife and trespassers. He works tirelessly on the eradication of invasive species and assists Conservancy work crews in habitat restoration.

"Ken is an ideal site steward," says Levi Plath, Conservancy land manager. "He's well-versed in what needs to be taken care of – trees, gates, everything. He's our eyes and ears at Kickapoo Caverns."

Ken's expertise and proximity to the cave saved Conservancy staff numerous trips in 2020. "I can be there in 20 minutes," says Ken, "and it's easy to go and spend half a day." Every time he goes to the property he discovers something new.

Ken is quick to point out the personal benefits of being site steward at Kickapoo Caverns. "Sometimes I go and just walk the land to get to know it. I enjoy the solitude."

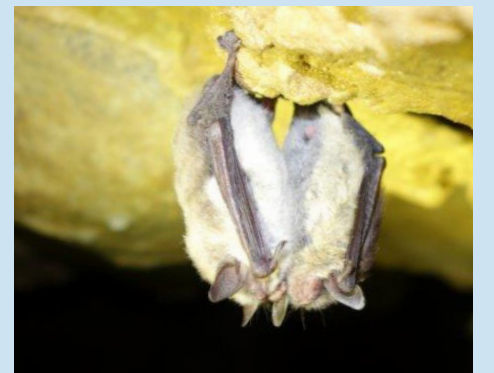
*Ken Cornish (above) volunteers as site steward at Kickapoo Caverns. Soon-to-be replaced roof (top). Image of a radio-collared bobcat recently captured on a trail camera at the nature preserve (right). Written by Drake Hokanson.*



## More good news at Kickapoo Caverns

Two healthy little brown bats were recently found near the cave entrance, where they were staging for their spring emergence. They were banded by the WI-DNR and returned to their hibernating spot.

2021 restoration work at the property will include a new roof and other improvements to the cave entrance building *plus* improved access for the bats. Already old and weathered, the building was damaged by a tree fall last year. Restoring it will allow us to proceed with plans to use it as a simple interpretive center. Due to the construction, there will be no cave tours this year.



*2017 photo of little brown bats at Kickapoo Caverns by Jennifer Redell*



# Anonymous donor rescues habitat for migrating songbirds

With abundant wildlife, spectacular scenic vistas, and rich history, Crawford County has inspired generations of residents and visitors alike. Yet, over time, that history sadly includes the loss of wildlife habitat. Here is one story of how you helped save a critical 108-acre piece of land north of Prairie du Chien with the help of a special donor.

An urgent email came through, ironically on April Fool's day, from Wisconsin DNR conservation biologist Craig Thompson. According to Craig, one of the last remaining undeveloped Mississippi River bluffslands, adjacent to the Limery Ridge Savanna State Natural Area, was to be sold at auction on May 7. That left just over a month to explore the site and secure funding. Even then, with the unpredictability of auctions, there was no assurance that our efforts would be rewarded.

The more we explored and learned about the natural resources on the site, the more important the acquisition became. We were nothing short of overwhelmed with the prospect of seeing this ecologically significant opportunity arise, without the means to act. At the same time, interest was high from area logging companies, which had eyes on the mature oak and walnut on the site.

"The land acquisition process is a slow one," said former Conservancy president Rob Tyser. "Land trusts need time for staff to complete site evaluations; seek board approval; secure appraisals, surveys, and title reviews; and secure funding for any land purchase. Securing grant funding alone is a process that can take years."

And then, a solution appeared. A supporter of the Conservancy, upon hearing about the ecological importance of the property, offered to step in as a conservation buyer to bid at auction and finance the purchase. The only requirement was that the involvement remain anonymous.

An early morning hike on the property last June revealed at least 36 species of migratory birds using the site, including the state threatened cerulean warbler (above). According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, cerulean warbler numbers have dropped by 72% since 1970. Conservancy staff are confident the protected habitat will continue to serve as a safe haven for them and for all the species currently living there.



"We were floored by the incredible generosity of the conservation buyer," said Tyser, "and the rest is history." On May 7th, after waiting through the tense hours of the online auction, the conservation buyer and Conservancy staff phones erupted with celebration as the buyer was the winning bidder. The closing paperwork was prepared, the offer to purchase was assigned to the Conservancy, and the deed was signed on August 21.

Earlier in 2020, a report was issued showing the global decline of many songbirds due to habitat loss. "Geographically, Mississippi Valley Conservancy is uniquely poised to help conserve those habitats, especially with the importance of the Mississippi River migratory flyway and the need for stopover sites for the birds," said Tyser, who is also a conservation biologist.

Among the key requirements for songbird populations are large blocks of connected habitat. The newly acquired land provides that, with its adjacency to the 205-acre DNR-owned Limery Ridge Savanna State Natural Area.

For many forest-nesting birds, the structure of the forest canopy is an important factor, as well as the native biodiversity to provide food sources. The prevalence of large, mature oak is especially favored by species such as cerulean warblers.

Songbird protection is not the only benefit of this acquisition. The forest helps slow water runoff to prevent flooding, and the trees sequester and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The property also preserves archaeological features, cliffs, caves, springs, and prairies.

Scenic views of the property will continue to be enjoyed by travelers on the Great River Road, thanks to the generosity of the anonymous donor. The land will soon be available for public access for hiking, bird-watching, nature exploration, hunting, and wildlife observation. The Conservancy relies on volunteer help for the maintenance of its nature preserves, including invasive species control and other forms of habitat restoration.



Cerulean warbler photo by Bruce Bartel

## Find Nature's Treasures – a new family activity!

You can now find free downloadable discovery challenges for our most hikeable nature preserves. *Find Nature's Treasures* is a fun and easy way to engage the eyes and ears of youngsters when you take them to these beautiful natural places. You'll find them on the *Nature Preserves* pages of our website.

## Mark your calendar for outdoor fun in 2021! \*

You're invited to all of these family-friendly walks, hikes, outdoor, and online activities. Get to know the land you've helped to protect.

### LINKED TO THE LAND HIKE SERIES

Learn something new at every event.

June 5	Planning a Pollinator Garden	Online Presentation
July 10	Kayaking Basics	Location to be determined
August 14	Fishing in the Driftless Area	Location to be determined
September 11	Can it, Freeze it, Dry it	Online Presentation
October 9	Foraging Hike	Tunnelville Cliffs, La Farge

### SPECIAL EVENTS

November 5	Fall Fundraiser	Radisson Hotel La Crosse
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\* Event details are subject to changes. To receive updates and reminders, sign up for our free e-newsletter at the bottom of our website at [www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org).

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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, non-profit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 21,672 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams and farmlands 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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**TAKE THE CHALLENGE**

**There's more fun in store with the 2021-2022 Trail Trek Challenge!**

The Trail Trek Challenge includes trails that are in or close to La Crosse and trails that are in surrounding counties. Inspirations for day trips and sightseeing are included in many of the program updates throughout the year.

The *challenge* is to walk at least 5 of the 16 designated trails within a year. Walk when it's convenient for you – 365 days of the year.

Registration is now open on our website, where you can learn about the newest feature – a unique children's discovery challenge for each trail.

The first 100 people to sign up online receive a 2021 Trail Trek Challenge bandana!

All the details and FREE registration are at: [mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc](http://mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc)

Monarch butterfly photo by William Petersen