

MVC preserves 80 acres on South Fork Bad Axe River



JANUARY 08, 2016 10:15 AM

On Monday, Dec. 28, Phil and Kathy Aaker signed a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) to permanently and legally protect their scenic and diverse 80-acre property along the South Fork Bad Axe River southwest of Viroqua.

Nearly 20 years ago, the scenic, winding Bad Axe River, wooded bluffs, rugged landscape and diverse habitat drew the attention of Phil and Kathy Aaker, purchasing the land after searching for the perfect property.

"We spent two years looking at properties," said Phil Aaker, a pilot. "In flying over, we were drawn by the water and encouraged by the Bad Axe Valley. From the dam at Sidie Hollow one can see the corridor along the river and how the whole system works for wildlife."

The same landscape and unique features drew the attention of the MVC, a local land trust that has designated certain areas, such as the Bad Axe River Corridor, as Priority Areas for habitat quality, prevalence of rare species, biodiversity, and other features treasured by local residents and visitors alike.

"We want to keep it wild and pass it on to the next generation," Kathy Aaker said. "We want to protect it from people not of the same mind, and (through the easement), we have a say in the future of the land."

According to MVC Executive Director Carol Abrahamzon, "A conservation easement is custom-written based on a landowner's wishes and what the land will support. The land remains in private ownership but is legally protected from future mining, subdivision and development. It is rewarding for us to work on such a beautiful, scenic site."

When asked about their favorite place on the land, they immediately said "the river." "There is a pretty place up stream, with riffles and rocks," said Kathy Aaker, "In the winter it ices up, and is neat to walk along."

The bridge over the river is Phil Aaker's favorite. "(It's) where our grandchildren like to swim. It rarely freezes over completely; the spring water keeps it too warm. In a state park, you might see the land in one or two seasons, but when you live there, you see it every day, and every day it is beautiful in a different way."

"This site is a perfect example of the impact a person can have, making a difference. That difference this couple has made is not just today, but forever," said MVC Board President Pat Caffrey. "They've worked hard to restore and improve the habitat, and the wildlife has responded."

Wildlife on the Aakers' land includes not only the usual characters, the whitetails, squirrels and wild turkeys, but also songbirds such as the willow flycatcher, yellow warbler, scarlet tanager and ovenbird. Both the prairie and the oak woodlands on the land provide a diversity of wildflowers, crucial habitat for area butterflies, bees and other pollinators.

A closer look at the landscape throughout the years reveals significant changes in both land use and habitat. The site (and its owners) endured countless hours of time, sweat and effort for habitat management and restoration.

In looking at a print of the valley floor, covered in verdant prairie wildflowers and grasses framed by wooded bluffs, Phil Aaker said, "Ten years ago, this (view) looked completely different. It was nothing but overgrown box elder trees and bare ground." By removing the trees and brush and planting native prairie seed, the Aakers converted the landscape to the vegetation it was over a century ago, native tallgrass prairie. They have since maintained the prairie with periodic prescribed burns and weed control.

"(Through the conservation easement) we can protect what we started," Phil Aaker said. "And it is something our grandkids can experience," Kathy Aaker said.

For information on how to permanently conserve land, receive tax incentives for conserving land, or to become a contributing member of Mississippi Valley Conservancy, visit MississippiValleyConservancy.org; write to 1309 Norplex Dr., Suite 9, La Crosse, WI 54602; or send email to info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org.