

MVC preserves 87 acres of land in Vernon County



23 HOURS AGO

"A beautiful place to simply be" could be the motto of the Coulee Region, the Driftless Area, or of any one of the nine counties Mississippi Valley Conservancy works to protect. It is, in fact, the motto of Nature Nooks Retreat and Kinship Place Conference Center, Mississippi Valley Conservancy's most recently protected property.

Tom Lukens, owner of Nature Nooks Retreat, has long had an interest in both habitat conservation and in sharing nature with others. "I wanted to protect those things that make a kid's heart beat faster, like catching frogs and turtles" Lukens said. "We developed Nature Nooks as a means to be passionate, protective and insightful

(about our natural surroundings). Our charter describes it best, 'to protect and enhance biodiversity and carrying capacity, and to create a means of sharing both an appreciation for and a profound sense of belonging to nature'."

On Dec. 15, Lukens took the next step necessary to make the protection of that land permanent, by signing a conservation easement with MVC, a La Crosse-based land trust. The easement prevents future owners from converting the land into a residential subdivision, gravel quarry, or otherwise undermining the natural habitats.

"This 87-acre site in Vernon County is exceptional in terms of biodiversity," said Megan Kabele, MVC conservation specialist. "The land hosts at least 14 state-listed species, including the wood turtle and pickerel frog." The property includes nearly a mile of frontage along the West Fork Kickapoo River, and a mix of habitat including oak woodlands, prairie, springs, streams, wetlands and floodplain.

"It is a humbling experience to meet someone like Tom," said MVC Executive Director Carol Abrahamzon. "He is so passionate about protecting his land, the frogs, turtles and wildlife that call it home. He also believes in educating others and teaching kids about nature in a fun and interactive way."

Lukens was the first landowner in the state of Wisconsin to install non-game habitat practices, incorporated as part of a streambank restoration project. His project included snake hibernacula and turtle basking logs, installed in 2004. The day after installation, Lukens said, "A snapping turtle came right up where I was sitting, put his claws on the rock and looked right at me. I think he was saying 'thank you'."

Lukens further lives his beliefs, as board chairman for Valley Stewardship Network, an organization partnering with Mississippi Valley Conservancy to further water quality improvements in the Kickapoo River watershed. Valley Stewardship Network is based in Viroqua.

"We've trained 150 water quality monitoring volunteers," Lukens said. "All of this, it is a mission of the heart."

Lukens is working on additional informational resources to share with visitors to Nature Nooks, including resources to show what birds one might see on which areas of the property, information on the turtles seen in the pond, as well as the soil and water resources.

Nature Nooks welcomes visitors to gather and enjoy the natural beauty and participate in seasonal outdoor activities, and more information can be found at www.NatureNooksRetreat.com.

"One heaping tablespoon of soil has as many living organisms as there are people on the planet... there is so much we don't know about the habitat we live in," Lukens said. "The greatest benefit I have is to be able to share this (land) with others."

For information on how to permanently conserve land, receive tax incentives for conserving the 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 an email to info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org.