

# CONSERVED

*Driftless Area of Southwest Wisconsin*

*The land.  
Our future.*





**“NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL  
GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL,  
COMMITTED CITIZENS CAN  
CHANGE THE WORLD; INDEED,  
IT’S THE ONLY THING THAT  
EVER HAS.”**

*~ MARGARET MEAD*

THE PATTENS TREASURE THE RICHES OF THE LAND NEAR THEIR HOME IN FERRYVILLE.  
READ THEIR STORY ON PAGE 16.



# After 20 years, Mississippi Valley Conservancy stays true to its mission

BY GRETCHEN AND DAVE SKOLODA

**I**t started so simply with a gathering on our deck in June 1995, to talk about the need for land conservation here in the Coulee Region. As we watched the rose-breasted grosbeaks at our feeders, we discussed the increasing loss of important habitat for birds and other wildlife and wondered what to do about it.

After that meeting, Gretchen Benjamin and Craig Thompson, both Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources employees at the time, arranged a meeting in August with representatives from The Nature Conservancy. We asked them for help in preserving some of the most vulnerable environmental areas. They said they admired

and supported the idea but didn't have the resources to help. They encouraged us to start our own land trust. So we set about to do just that.

Our group of a dozen people with varied backgrounds, occupations and skills continued to meet. We had a lot to learn, but we had help from Gathering Waters, the Bluffland Alliance and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Months of meetings and reading stacks of material on how to start a land trust followed to determine the structure, area to be served, name, bylaws and mission statement. We announced the formation of Mississippi Valley Conservancy in

the shelter on Granddad Bluff on October 13, 1996.

Maureen Kinney, a local attorney, filed incorporation papers, bylaws and application for nonprofit status on December 31, 1996, working pro bono for land conservation as she has continued to do for 20 years.

Most of the founders of this organization continue to be active, some as board members, some as volunteers and donors. As we look back on how landowners and other collaborators have responded with this 20th anniversary publication, we also look forward to the many opportunities for protecting land in the years to come. 🍂



**GRETCHEN AND DAVE SKOLODA ARE AMONG THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY. THE COUPLE HOSTED A GATHERING ON THEIR DECK IN JUNE OF 1995 WITH THE PURPOSE OF FINDING WAYS TO PRESERVE THE BEAUTY AND CHARACTER OF THE AREA.**

Photo credit: Bob Hurt

**ORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS - AND THEIR OCCUPATION AT THE TIME**

- CRAIG THOMPSON** - WISCONSIN DNR BIOLOGIST | **MARY THOMPSON** - TEACHER
- MAUREEN KINNEY** - LAWYER | **CHARLES LEE** - UW-LA CROSSE HISTORY PROFESSOR
- PEG ZAPPEN** - LA CROSSE PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
- BARBARA FRANK** - SIERRA CLUB OFFICER | **PAT WILSON** - ENGINEER
- FRED LESHER** - AUDUBON SOCIETY MEMBER | **ANN KORSCHGEN** - UW-LA CROSSE PROFESSOR AND ADMINISTRATOR
- GRETCHEN BENJAMIN** - WISCONSIN DNR RIVER SPECIALIST | **GRETCHEN AND DAVID SKOLODA** - NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS

**FOR A MORE DETAILED HISTORY, VISIT [MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG](http://MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG)**



**"VALLEY FOG"**  
COON VALLEY, VERNON  
COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Robert J. Hurt is an architect and landscape photographer from Dakota, Minnesota. His aesthetic has been formed by his love for the land and his architectural and conservation land planning background. He works extensively with conservation groups and his photography has appeared in publications throughout the country.

# Contents

- 48 *Board of Directors & Staff*
- 49 *McKnight Partnership*
- 52 *Service Area Map*
- 53 *6 Steps to Forever Land*
- 54 *Leading Mississippi Valley Conservancy Into the Future*



**8**  
*Mississippi Valley Conservancy's Story is One of Stewardship*



**10**  
*Sustainable Practices Save a Farm, Continue a Tradition*



**14**  
*Volunteers Save Rare Prairie from Strip Mall Fate*



**16**  
*Land is a Treasure that Shares its Riches*



**20**  
*Sharing the Vision of Mississippi Valley Conservancy*



**24**  
*Habitat Key to Saving Rare Species*



**26**  
*The Outdoor Classroom Teaches Valuable Lessons*



**30**  
*Saved from the Shovel*



**36**  
*Cultural and Natural Resources Symbolize Our Shared Heritage*



**38**  
*Like Friendships, Relationships with the Land Evolve on Their Own*



**42**  
*Kickapoo Indian Caverns Were a Labor of Love*



**44**  
*Business Leader's Vision, Generosity, Strengthen Conservation Effort*

Photo credit: Bob Hurt (La Crosse River Conservancy)

# MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY'S STORY IS ONE OF STEWARDSHIP

Dear Mississippi Valley Conservancy,

*"In 26 years of the Stewardship grant program, DNR has awarded 70 different nonprofits more than 600 grants to purchase conservation and recreation lands all over Wisconsin. As you know, Mississippi Valley Conservancy is due some credit for those impressive totals.*

*DNR has awarded 34 Stewardship grants to the Conservancy totaling more than \$8 million for conservation in the La Crosse bluffslands, the Kickapoo Valley, Onalaska, Holland Sand Prairie and Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area and many other special places across the Driftless.*

*It's easy to focus on the numbers, dollars and statistics, but I hope you agree that those totals don't quite tell the best part of the Stewardship story.*

*The Stewardship story is a rich tale of fascinating and beautiful prairies, wooded coulees and the meandering river valleys of Wisconsin's Driftless region: the list of your Stewardship lands reminds us how blessed we are in Wisconsin by an amazing diversity of land and water resources.*

*It is also a story about harnessing local passion for those places. When the Stewardship grant program was created, its architects recognized that management of our natural resources is an increasingly complicated task, one that DNR cannot do alone. Local partners like the Conservancy channel passion, leadership and investment in conservation, which Stewardship grants can match dollar for dollar.*

*For every grant awarded, the Conservancy provided matching funds and a lasting commitment to management. That list of places now conserved by the Conservancy's efforts is also a long roster of people and organizations committed to their protection. The map of your preserves can be understood as map of city investment, foundation and individual gifts and hours of volunteer labor.*

*Stewardship grants allow citizens to play an active role in permanent conservation of our natural heritage. The Conservancy's portfolio of Stewardship lands is testimony to our shared success. I'm pleased to take this opportunity to thank you."*

Sincerely,  
Pam Foster Felt

PAM FOSTER FELT IS THE WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STEWARDSHIP NONPROFIT GRANT MANAGER.

**Editor's note:** Pam Foster Felt sent congratulations to Mississippi Valley Conservancy on our 20th anniversary, "To acknowledge your long and successful partnership with the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Grant Program: the Conservancy's members and supporters have reason to be proud." The following is her message.



# SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES SAVE A FARM, CONTINUE A TRADITION

BY JIM MUNSCH



JIM AND PHYLIS MUNSCH HAVE A CONSERVATION EASEMENT ON THEIR 98-ACRE ORGANIC BEEF FARM THAT OVERLOOKS COON VALLEY IN VERNON COUNTY.

I trace my conservation roots all the way to Indiana where, at a family reunion in the summer of 1950, John Durnbaugh, a relative, offered me a summer farmhand job. I can draw a direct line from the half-decade of summers I spent on that farm to the conservation practices my wife, Phylis, and I put in place here in the Coon Creek watershed in Southwestern Wisconsin and to our decision in 2011 to permanently protect our farm. We have completed a conservation easement with the guidance and ongoing support of Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

John Durnbaugh was an excellent farmer. But more importantly he was a devoted soil and wildlife conservationist. This was not trivial in 1950; many of our relatives and neighbors were antagonistic to government programs in general and specifically the USDA Soil Conservation Service promoting and supporting conservation efforts. But John was a “natural scientist” and forged on with contour strips, crop rotations, cover crops, grass waterways and managed pastures because soil loss troubled his very soul. He understood the value of biodiversity without even saying the words.

## Erodible land converted to grazing

Fast forward 26 years. Phylis and I bought a 100-acre farm in Vernon County on a

## “Oh, and we have planted more than 1,500 hardwood trees.”

ridgetop three miles from the location of the base camp in Coon Valley of the first Soil Conservation Service efforts in the country. The farm had been saved in the '30s by adapting soil-saving practices, but it had been used hard. We both had jobs off the farm. We continued a grain and hay rotation on contour strips but saw that there was still soil erosion. We decided to back away from cropping and put the more erodible land into pasture. Soon after, we learned management intensive (rotational) grazing from a group of farmers and Extension people in the Great River Graziers. Eventually, the whole farm except for woodland was converted to grazing.

Along the way we measured everything. In the ensuing 35 years, soil organic matter has increased by 250 percent; erosion has been dramatically reduced; pasture production has almost doubled; and bird species have become more diverse. Oh, and we have planted more than 1,500 hardwood trees.

So when we became aware of the ability to preserve and perpetuate all of this through a conservation easement we jumped at the chance. The Conservancy made the process very easy. It has also demonstrated a willingness and ability to protect the terms of the easements into which landowners pour their hearts.

### Continuing a tradition, conserving forever

The story has an epilogue. During the process of creating the easement, I mentioned to neighbors Ernest and Joseph Haugen what we were doing. They were a Wisconsin version of John Durnbaugh, having lived through and participated wholeheartedly in the Soil Conservation Service Coon Creek watershed initiative. Their father had been one of the first farmers in the United States to implement agricultural methods and conservation structures and practices to conserve soil. They took great pride in maintaining the methods. They seemed to welcome the opportunity to enter into an easement supported by the Conservancy to perpetuate their lives' work for conservation.

The Haugens often joked that during a rain event they got twice as much rain as I did. Punch line: because their farm was twice as big as mine. So, I guess the impact of their conservation work and easement is twice mine. For humanity it's all important because it maintains the soil needed to sustain us. 🍃

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jim** and Phylis Munsch have lived on their farm for 35 years. In that time, they have increased the quality of the soil and significantly reduced erosion.



**PROJECT:** Munsch property conservation easement

**LOCATION:** Coon Valley, Vernon County

**LANDOWNERS:** Jim and Phylis Munsch

**AREA PRESERVED:** 98 acres

**OVERVIEW:** The Munsch's organic beef farm has had a conservation easement in place since 2011. Prior to that, they had instituted conservation practices which included the transition from crop rotation to rotational grazing to save the soil from erosion. They also planted 1,500 trees on the property.

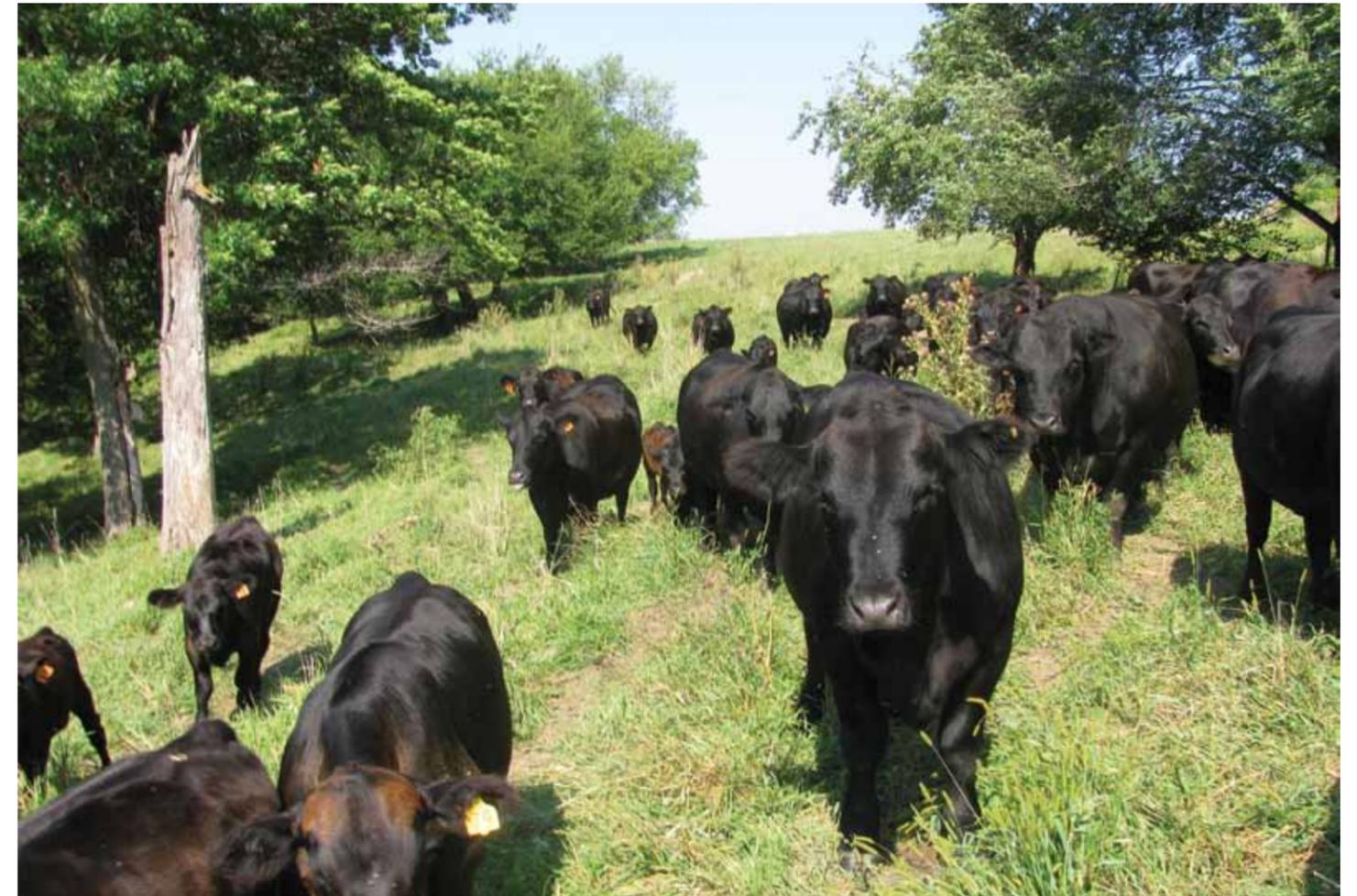


Photo credit: Sid Shapiro

Top photo: Organic beef benefits from rotational grazing, which also saves the soil from erosion. Bottom left: Jim discusses conservation practices with Carol Abrahamson, executive director of Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Bottom right: Jim will leave a legacy to future generations through the conservation easement.



# VOLUNTEERS SAVE RARE PRAIRIE FROM STRIP MALL FATE

BY PETE PUTNAM

*"This land has changed me... forever!"*

PETE LOOKS OUT OVER THE HOLLAND SAND PRAIRIE, A 61-ACRE PIECE OF LAND THAT WILL BE PROTECTED FOREVER THANKS TO THE EFFORTS OF MANY.



**PROJECT:** Holland Sand Prairie State Natural Area

**LOCATION:** Holmen, La Crosse County

**LANDOWNER:** Town of Holland

**PURCHASED AND PROTECTED BY:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy with help from the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

**AREA PRESERVED:** 61 acres

**OVERVIEW:** This land is a remnant prairie of the La Crosse-Galesville Terrace on the Mississippi River Terrace created during the last ice age. It's the only known project in the state where citizens agreed to tax themselves in order to purchase development rights and conservation land. There is tremendous biodiversity on site with more than 150 species of plants identified. The land is open to the public.

Photo credit: Pete Putnam

I have been involved with the Holland Sand Prairie from day one! It started with a meeting that Mississippi Valley Conservancy was conducting about saving "some very rare land" that was across the street from my home. Wow, I thought, that weed patch is rare? The more involved I became, the more I learned about what was once a great regional prairie along the river.

My family has lived across the street from the Holland Sand Prairie SNA since December 31, 1981, when we moved into Wisconsin for employment. I thought that more single family homes would be built on that land, but the Village of Holmen was trying to annex the area so that they could have a strip mall. I attended my first village meeting and told them that we did not want the area to be annexed!

This was an 80-acre tract of land that we were trying to save. Beaver Builders had rights to purchase 20 acres of land, so that left about 61 acres of prairie. A member of the Conservancy purchased the land and held it until the purchasing details could be worked out among the Wisconsin DNR, the Conservancy and the Town of Holland. The people of the Town of Holland voted to increase their taxes for a 25 percent share of the land cost.

George Hammes, the town chair, suggested that a friends group should be formed to support the new prairie. As a retired quality improvement engineer I have led quality improvement teams and projects. A project is a project, isn't it? I asked Jay Fernholz, a landscape architect, if he would be the vice chair if I would be the chair to handle the details. Jay would be our expert. The friends group is called the Friends of the Holland Sand Prairie.

I had many work days on the prairie cutting trees and brush, fencing to keep out motor vehicles, collecting prairie seeds for replanting and assisting on every prescribed burn. I helped build the kiosk and have taken over cutting the trails after my friend George Varnum, who first called attention to the prairie, died. There have been many volunteers over the years, but I am still working on the details.

Sixty-one acres have been forever saved from the bulldozer. I am part of a "project" that will live long after I die. I have slowed down as I age, but I still stay involved. This land has changed me... forever! 🍃

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Pete Putnam** is a retired quality improvement engineer who put his expertise to work restoring the Holland Sand Prairie SNA.





# LAND IS A TREASURE THAT SHARES ITS RICHES

BY LAURA PATTEN

LAURA AND ANDY PATTEN APPRECIATE THE FACT THAT LAND ADJACENT TO THEIRS IS A MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY NATURE PRESERVE (SUGAR CREEK BLUFF STATE NATURAL AREA).



**W**e're not rich people. Some people think we are, though, when we say that our place in Ferryville looks out over 440 acres of prairie, marsh and woodland—a landscape that is protected forever.

But I quickly tell them we don't own the expansive area. Instead, I say, the Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area belongs to everyone. No housing developments will ever pop up there overnight, no mining operations will gut the land, no big box stores will lure shoppers to consume more, more, more. The land is everyone's to enjoy.

And four years ago, my husband, Andy, and I bought our place largely because of that.

We knew that native landscapes in the Driftless Area were disappearing and that many of the native plants and animals were leaving along with it. So to have the chance to call this protected area our neighbor was a dream come true.

It still is. We know how lucky we are with every sunrise and every evening, when we stand in the barnyard alongside our sheep and alpacas and watch the deer and listen for owls, without other rooftops littering the view or people polluting the sounds.

Sometimes we forego our chores and head toward the bluff where we get one of the most breathtaking views of the Mississippi River. On these hikes, I sometimes

wonder: What would happen if individuals and public and private entities didn't work together to keep some land open for everyone to enjoy? I believe we'd systematically shut each other out, one parcel at a time. The fabric, the very strength, of our communities would weaken and we'd be cheated out of adventures that lure us from our own backyards and teach us how to explore and adopt new perspectives, and how to appreciate and contribute to what we're part of. And what we're part of is the land.

I've come to realize that on maps, the blank spaces that are open to the public are the most valuable because they're so rare. It was the Conservancy that taught me that Wisconsin has lost 99 percent of its prairie and that only a fraction of one percent of our state's oak savanna remains. Yet, standing in our backyard, when I look to the east, west and south, I see a prairie and an oak savanna, there for everyone at the Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area to experience. My mind's eye also sees what came before us, the beauty of the here and now and the promise of tomorrow.

And that makes me think that maybe we—all of us who know this land—are rich after all. 🍷

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Laura Patten** enjoys breathtaking views of the Mississippi River from the Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area.



**SITE:** Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area

**LOCATION:** Ferryville, Crawford County

**LANDOWNERS:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy

**AREA PRESERVED:** 440 acres

**OVERVIEW:** The Pattens are members of the Conservancy and purchased their land adjacent to Sugar Creek Bluff because they knew it would never be developed. The preserve, owned by the Conservancy, includes a trout stream and rare dry prairie habitat.



*"And what we're part of is the land."*



Photo credit: Sid Shapiro

# SHARING THE VISION OF MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY

BY LYNNE VALIQUETTE



LYNNE AND KEITH VALIQUETTE HAVE MADE AMUNDSON COULEE NEAR HOLMEN THEIR HOME FOR 40 YEARS. THEY DECIDED TO FOREGO POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT VALUE TO RETAIN THE CHARACTER OF THEIR PROPERTY.

*"I dreamed this land into our lives, literally ..."*



**PROJECT:** Valiquette property conservation easement

**LOCATION:** Holmen, La Crosse County

**LANDOWNERS:** Lynne and Keith Valiquette

**AREA PRESERVED:** 160 acres

**OVERVIEW:** The Valiquettes own 160 acres of scenic bluffland at the end of Amundson Coulee. It consists of rolling fields, woodlands and dramatic bluff slopes that lead to scenic ridges. They signed a conservation easement on their land in 2007 in order to protect it from development regardless of who owns the property.

I dreamed this land into our lives, literally. I saw green fields, grazing calves, our cabin on the edge of a slope, windows catching the morning light. After breakfast, we drove to make an offer. That was almost 40 years ago.

Here at the end of Amundson Coulee, the land reminds us every day that it's ancient, and contains layers of history, both human and natural. A bent signal tree on Hickory Trail points to the bluff above us, where a neighbor says there are burial mounds. The coulee is the source of Sour Creek, also the name of a former schoolhouse at its entry. It used to be called Silver Creek, but the neighbors renamed it after the disposition of two crabby Norwegian bachelor farmers. The old farm house, now razed, held abandoned boots and fiddle music. Lowing cattle have given way to the bleat of sheep, and the cackle of hens laying eggs.

The wild world continues to change as well. Walnuts and box elder are muscling into birch and oak. Blackberries, once plentiful, are succumbing to gooseberries and gray dogwood. We're lucky to find a handful of morels each year. We struggle mightily with invasive honeysuckle and garlic mustard. The vegetative world survives and evolves. And so do the animals that populate the coulee. A graceful doe and her fawns counteract the memory of this spring's black bear's slaughter of our ram. Turkeys flapping

into the trees startle the dog. In the morning the crows call and wrens jabber. Sometimes, at dusk, we hear coyotes howl.

This piece of Wisconsin is our home now, although we hesitate to say we own it. But we do feel responsible for preserving this vital ecosystem. While we were still working, driving between Holmen and La Crosse, observing the rapid development of the woods and farmland, we became anxious about the future of our beautiful area in the Driftless region.

That's when a New Year's resolution came into play. Once Dave and Gretchen Skoloda shared the mission of Mississippi Valley Conservancy with us, our resolution for 2007 became to save this land from development, past our lifetimes. We will be forever grateful that the Conservancy made this possible.

We salute the Conservancy for its vision, inspiration and accomplishments. Despite the often demoralizing conflicts and chaos of the world, it seeks to preserve the land's story.

*"Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."* (Rumi) 🍀

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Lynne Valiquette** lives with her husband, Keith, in rural Holmen where they raise sheep, chickens and a few different types of vegetables.



Photo credit: Sid Shapiro



ORNATE BOX TURTLE

Photo: Tom Rhorer

# HABITAT KEY TO SAVING RARE SPECIES

BY DAVE SKOLODA

It may not be the fastest creature on properties protected by Mississippi Valley Conservancy, but it certainly is one of the most colorful—and most threatened. The ornate box turtle, a Wisconsin endangered species, is about 5 inches long with an elaborately decorated shell of dark brown or black with yellow lines that radiate from the center. The legs of the male turtle are marked with brilliant scarlet and it has an eye the color of a Wisconsin Badger sweatshirt. It's Wisconsin's only terrestrial turtle, one that seldom goes into the water. Because it's so rare, it's a good example

of the importance of protected habitat, one of the main threats to Wisconsin's rare species, many of which are found on lands protected by the Conservancy.

The ornate box turtle's story is typical: continued loss of habitat each year makes it imperative for efforts to protect and restore land, ensuring the turtle's habitat remains intact and useable for nesting. Knowing which areas the turtles are living and nesting in is vital in planning management, such as the timing of prescribed burns, invasive species control and other activities.

The Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin says the ornate box turtle is often killed along roadways because without adequate natural habitat, they sometimes nest on the gravel sides of roads which they cross in search of nesting sites. Turtle populations are particularly susceptible to anything that harms the adult population because they are not able to reproduce until they are 12 to 15 years old. "Losing one adult turtle can thus be harmful to the population as a whole," wrote Caitlin Williamson of the Foundation. 🐢



BLANDING'S TURTLE Photo: Suzanne Harris



CHERRYSTONE DROP SNAIL Photo: Abbie Church



SIX-LINED RACERUNNER Photo: Nate Fayram, DNR

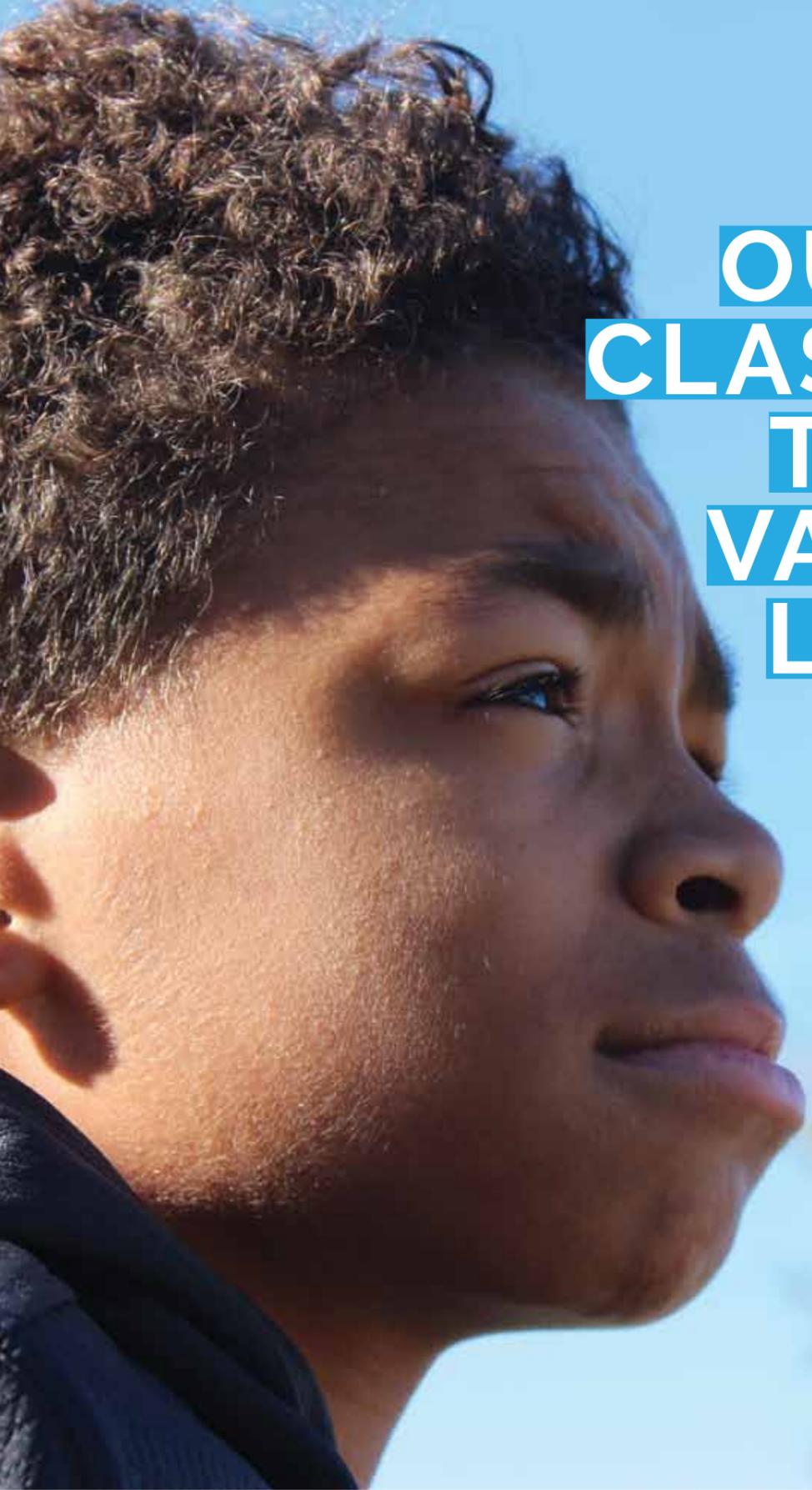
**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Collectors and pet suppliers have taken a toll on the ornate box turtle numbers, so much so that the identity of the Conservancy property where they have been found in the past must remain a secret.



PRAIRIE RING-NECKED SNAKE Photo: Suzanne Harris



WOOD TURTLE Photo: Suzanne Harris



# THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM TEACHES VALUABLE LESSONS

BY SCOTT BAGNIEFSKI

**I**n my 22 years as a middle school educator, I've found one lesson plan that always works with my students. While some lessons are flops, this one works every time. Students learn in a fun, exciting way and it works for every student. It's the "being there" experience. It's getting students to experience the outdoor classroom.

When young adults get to travel to the outdoor classroom and work with a local organization on a real project that benefits our community, and hear from experts in the field, it's a successful, slam dunk lesson.



**"I feel enlightened, and I need to be outside more often."**  
  
~ Student, Western Technical College's At-Risk High School



## “Students learn in a fun, exciting way and it works for every student.”

For the past 18 years, Mississippi Valley Conservancy has partnered with students at Lincoln Middle School and provided powerful outdoor classroom experiences. Once in the fall and once in the spring, our Lincoln seventh-grade students get on a school bus and travel with the Conservancy to the surrounding bluffs or prairies to work on an environmental project, and at the same time learn about a number of environmental issues. Working with the Conservancy, students may learn about invasive species in our area and successful prevention methods, land and prairie conservation techniques, plant and tree identification, identify and collect seeds for the restoration of natural prairie grasses, or learn about other environmental issues facing our area. There is no better way to make learning relevant than to be in the field and allow a natural learning process to occur in the outdoor classroom. Students are naturally curious when hearing from these professionals. The outdoor classroom allows students to get engaged and be involved and then

we bring that experience back to the classroom for discussion and follow up. It is simply a great way to learn.

In addition to learning about our environment in the field, there are many other benefits that come from these experiences in our outdoor classroom. Students get to work together as a team on an environmental project, students must effectively communicate with each other to accomplish the task in the field, students get opportunities to show leadership and demonstrate responsibility for a real world project, and maybe most importantly, students complete a project that benefits others and the environment. Students spend time and energy on an environmental project that creates a sense of satisfaction and joy from giving and not receiving. A significant experience in giving is a very important lesson for all of us. 🍃

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Scott Bagniefski** is a seventh-grade teacher at Lincoln Middle School in La Crosse.



“There is no better way to make learning relevant than to be in the field and allow a natural learning process to occur in the outdoor classroom.”

~ Scott Bagniefski, seventh-grade teacher, Lincoln Middle School

# SAVED FROM THE SHOVEL

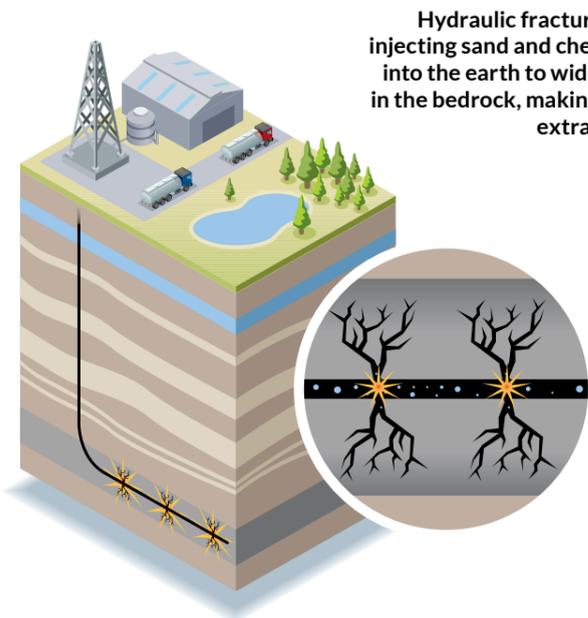
BY SUSAN COLLITON

RURAL LANDOWNERS ARE BEING TARGETED BY MINING COMPANIES THAT ARE INTERESTED IN PURCHASING MINERAL RIGHTS IN ORDER TO MINE SAND USED IN THE "FRACKING" PROCESS OF EXTRACTING NATURAL GAS AND PETROLEUM FROM THE EARTH.

THIS IS THE STORY OF TWO LANDOWNERS WHO RESISTED THE OFFERS AND INSTEAD PROTECTED THEIR LAND FROM SUCH A FATE FOREVER.

The uniquely beautiful Driftless Area is known for its towering bluffs, verdant hills, fertile fields and abundant rivers and streams. Now, though, it's getting more attention for what lies beneath and can't be seen: valuable silica sand used for extracting natural gas and petroleum via hydraulic fracturing (fracking), illustrated below.

Trempealeau County has 65 non-metallic mines, including sand mines, gravel pits and limestone quarries, making it one of the most heavily mined counties in Wisconsin. Frac sand mining operations slice into the green hills of former family farms with bulldozers, harvesting yellow sand instead of crops. The excavations decapitate hilltops and spill sand from the open wounds.



Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting sand and chemicals deep into the earth to widen fractures in the bedrock, making it easier to extract gas or oil.

### Protected forever from development

Contrast that with Vicky Schultz's property near Arcadia. Her picturesque 400-acre farm in a secluded valley close to the Trempealeau River has been spared. There, you can hear summer breezes blowing over the ridgetops and through the tall corn. Meadowlark, red-winged blackbird and whip-poor-will calls greet the Schultz family daily. Threatened Acadian flycatchers and red-shouldered hawks live there. Vicky's wide, spring-fed pond is a chemical-free home for bass, bluegills, frogs and migrating ducks.

The Schultz farm features goat prairie, rare oak savanna and productive farm fields. The land's fresh springs, fields, trees and gardens have been lovingly cared for and managed by the family for more than 30 years. Once, a North Dakota mining company approached Vicky about selling. Some of the local landowners had agreed to sell their acres. "My son restored the prairies on this property. Cousins and grandchildren camp, swim and play here. I heard my first whip-poor-will here—we named the farm Whip-poor-will Way. No, selling this land... I'd be selling my soul."

So the way Vicky's land is today is how it will stay forever. Thanks to a customized conservation agreement she created with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, the Schultz's piece of paradise is off-limits to mining and other destructive development. It remains a protected home for rare native plants and wildlife. And a place of beauty and serenity for the human spirit.



**PROJECT:** Schultz Farm conservation easement

**LOCATION:** Arcadia, Trempealeau County

**LANDOWNER:** Vicky Schultz

**AREA PRESERVED:** 400 acres

**OVERVIEW:** Vicky Schultz has a conservation easement on her farm which will prevent it from being developed or mined. The farm is home to several rare species, including the wood turtle, eastern meadowlark and whip-poor-will.

Photo credit: Tom Rhorer

*"I heard my first whip-poor-will here - we named the farm whip-poor-will way."*

PICTURED, VICKY SCHULTZ.



## Mary's pastoral property strongly contrasts with the mines' sand pits, offering a critical safe zone and access to shelter, food and water for deer, red fox, grouse, bobcat and bear.

### An oasis in the sand

On the eastern side of Trempealeau County, Mary Drangstveit's beautiful farm in rural Taylor has escaped the bulldozers, too. Literally an oasis in the sand, her 120-acre property is bounded on three sides by active sand mines. The mining company wanted to acquire Mary's land to expand their operations. She said no, and made it official with a conservation easement facilitated by Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

Mary's pastoral property strongly contrasts with the mines' sand pits, raised railroad tracks and wastewater pools. The farm offers a critical safe zone and access to shelter, food and water for deer, red fox, grouse, bobcat and bear. Monarch butterflies make the meadows and planted fields their home. Stands of tall oak and pine, the rustling of leaves, and the buzz of cicadas help muffle the clamor of the neighboring mines.

"I did it to protect the land and the water, for the plants and animals here that depend on them," says Mary.

For Mary and her family the land is an oasis of another sort, also. The emotional bonds with the farm are strong. Here they celebrated holidays, made snow angels and snowmen, rode horseback to neighbors' farms, harvested hay and picked berries. Thanks to Mary's foresight, the farm will forever echo cherished memories of the past and provide a protected home where generations can come to make new memories in the future.

Rural families in the Driftless Area who have declined offers from sand mining companies each leave a landowner's legacy others will appreciate forever. 🍃

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Susan Colliton**, a life-long resident of Wisconsin's Driftless region, is a semi-retired writer and full-time advocate for our priceless natural environment.



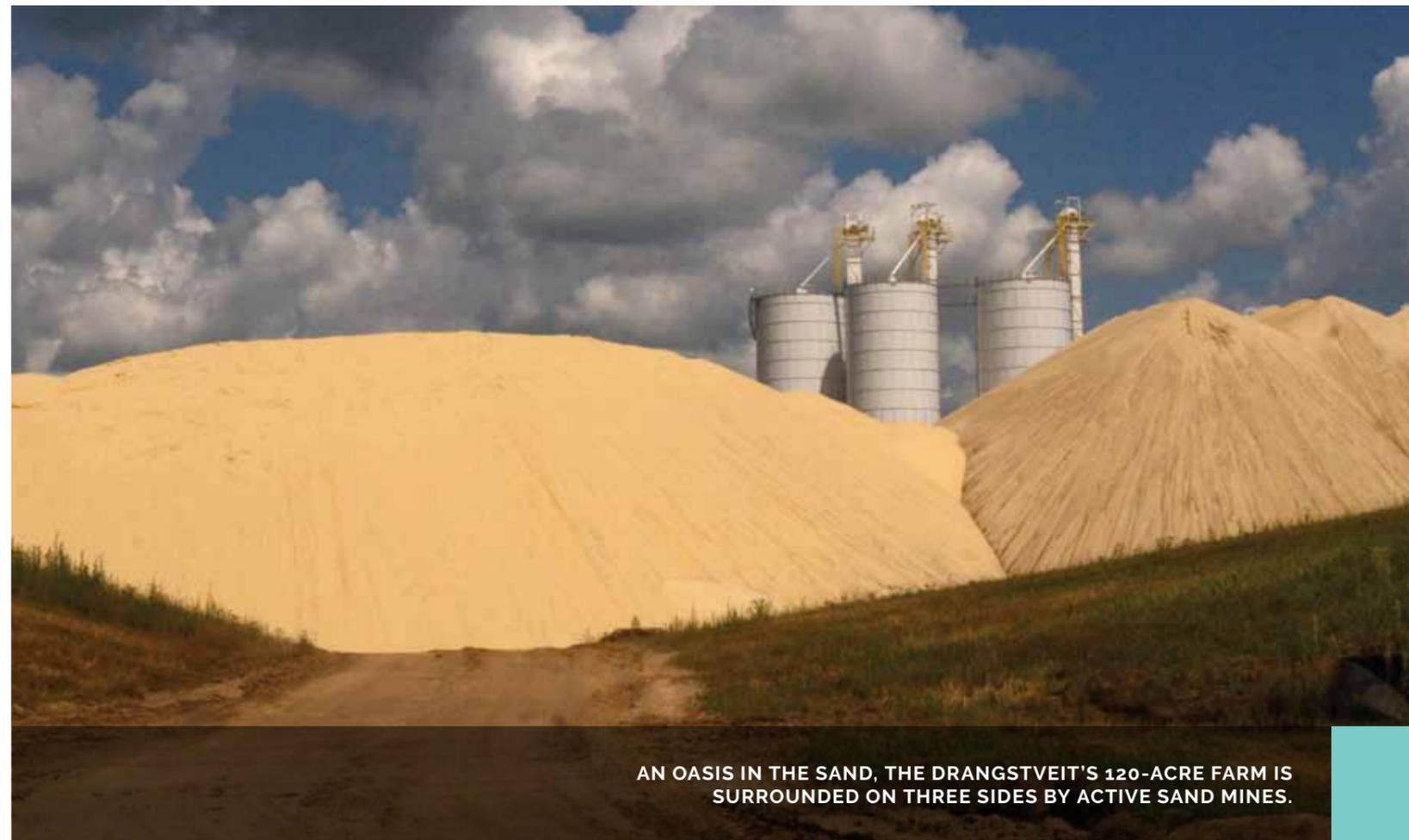
**PROJECT:** Drangstveit Farm Conservation

**LOCATION:** Taylor, Trempealeau County

**LANDOWNER:** Mary and Leland Drangstveit

**AREA PRESERVED:** 120 acres

**OVERVIEW:** Mary and Leland Drangstveit have a conservation easement on their land which will protect it in its present state. With sand mines surrounding her property, she has a refuge of sorts for plants and animals that have been displaced from subdivision development or mining.



AN OASIS IN THE SAND, THE DRANGSTVEIT'S 120-ACRE FARM IS SURROUNDED ON THREE SIDES BY ACTIVE SAND MINES.

Photo credit: Tom Rhorer

# CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCES SYMBOLIZE OUR SHARED HERITAGE

BY JIM GALLAGHER



MUCH OF THE LAND PRESERVED BY THE CONSERVANCY HAS CULTURAL AS WELL AS ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE, SUCH AS THE EFFIGY OF A BIRD AT CASSVILLE BLUFFS STATE NATURAL AREA. IT IS REVEALED IN THE PHOTO ABOVE BY LIDAR (LIGHT DETECTION AND RANGING), WHICH USES A PULSED LASER TO EXAMINE THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH.



**SITE:** Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area

**LOCATION:** Cassville, Grant County

**LANDOWNER:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy

**PURCHASED AND PROTECTED BY:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy with help from the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

**AREA PRESERVED:** 244 acres

**VISIT:** Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area is a special place, home to Wisconsin's only mile of protected riverfront property that has no highway between the bluffs and Mississippi River. These bluffs are also important habitat for rare animals. Go explore the preserve for yourself and enjoy the view!

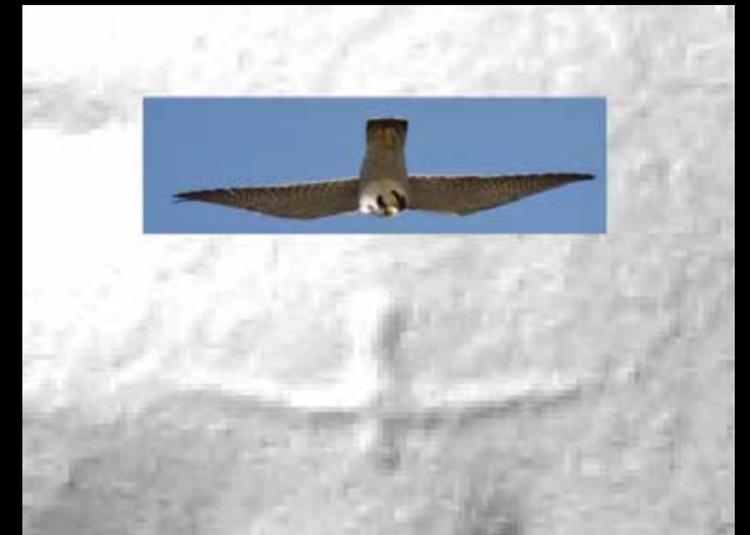
Photo credit: WisconsinView

Mississippi Valley Conservancy has a long history of preserving land that has both significant natural and cultural resources. This is one of the reasons I am a supporter. As a (retired) professional archaeologist, I am committed to the preservation of our past cultural (human-made) resources. However, I am also committed to the preservation of our natural heritage. Cultural and natural resources are not, in my mind, mutually exclusive concepts. They are both part of a great continuum of our existence and heritage, both are fragile, and both need our protection. Ancient Native American villages, endangered species, European-American fur trade posts, and goat prairies and marshes are all a part of the great fabric of our existence.

I experience the same sense of reverence and peace whether standing in the midst of an old growth forest or in front of an ancient burial mound. My sense of loss is the same when an ancient archaeological site is bulldozed or when I hear the report of another species gone extinct, or a wetland destroyed.

We can marvel at the remains of past cultural achievements but can also learn from them. Many different human groups have lived in our area over the last roughly 10,000 years, each with distinct cultural strategies. Each can be seen as an experiment in survival, each interacting with the physical conditions of the times. Each group, from the earliest Native Americans to the early European-American fur traders, has left its imprint as they have attempted to adapt to their environment and simultaneously exploit it. In this sense, each represents a lesson in human survival.

Thirteen of the 154 land parcels preserved to date by the Conservancy have known significant archaeological or historical components. In my opinion, the most important of these is the Cassville Bluffs State



Close-up view of the peregrine falcon-shaped earthen effigy mound in the Cassville State Bluffs State Natural Area. The wingspan is 270 feet. See page 36 for a wider view.

Natural Area. This 244-acre parcel was conserved through a joint effort by Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the Wisconsin DNR.

Here, in a blufftop forest directly overlooking a broad swath of the Mississippi River Valley, is a spectacular earthen effigy of a bird (most likely a peregrine falcon) with a wingspan of 270 feet. The people of the Woodland Culture that built it some 1,000 years ago most likely did not see a distinction between the mound and the natural environment surrounding it, but saw both as part of the great circle of life. The mound itself may even symbolize that concept.

My archaeologist's cap is off to the Conservancy which sees the connection between the human and the natural components of the land and does everything in its power to preserve them both for future generations.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jim Gallagher** is Professor Emeritus of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.





FISHING THE STREAMS IN THE DRIFTLESS AREA HAS BEEN A FAVORITE PASTIME OF RICHARD KYTE, ONE THAT HE WANTED TO SHARE WITH HIS SONS.

# LIKE FRIENDSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LAND EVOLVE ON THEIR OWN

BY RICHARD KYTE

For anyone who loves the natural world, who feels most at home and most alive in the company of wild things—trees and flowers, birds, fish, rocks and streams—the important question is not just how to preserve these things for the next generation, but also how to inspire in the next generation a similar passion. For we all know that whatever is not loved will perish, no matter how much we have invested in its protection.

When my wife Cindi and I returned to the Midwest after a long absence, I started fishing the Coulee Region streams, partly to rekindle the passions that had become dormant after years in big cities, but also to introduce my sons to a way of life that had been missing in their childhood. I wanted them to have the experience of nature that I had as a child.

But that is not easy to do. It seemed at times the more deeply I fell in love with the Driftless streams, the more likely my sons were to decline the invitation to join me. They had other commitments, friends urging them back indoors, back to what is popular and interesting and, well, normal.

When my invitations were declined I thought of the meeting between John Muir and Ralph Waldo Emerson,

only in Muir's case the situation was reversed: the older man declined the invite of the younger.

It was May 1871, and the aging Ralph Waldo Emerson was in California as part of a speaking tour of the American West. He was at the time the most famous author in America, drawing huge crowds wherever he spoke. Muir had been reading his essays since he was young, and when he heard rumors that "Emerson is here," he could hardly contain his excitement. Muir tried to convince Emerson to delay his return to Concord and spend some time with him in Yosemite camping under the stars. But though they rode together to the Mariposa Grove and spent a few hours walking among the sequoias, Emerson could not be persuaded to stay longer. Muir watched sadly as Emerson departed: "I felt lonely, so sure had I been that Emerson of all men would be the quickest to see the mountains and sing them."

Emerson's essays had encouraged and inspired Muir, had given him words to use, taught him the value of his own perceptions. But, in the end, Muir had to sing the song of the mountains in his own tongue, to his own tune, finding a way to persuade the people of his generation that the Sierras and their giant sequoias were worth saving.

Photo credit: Soren Johnson

Last summer my youngest son, Evan, had an internship with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. One evening he came home physically exhausted but full of enthusiasm about the place they had worked all day. “Dad,” he said, “you’ve got to see the Sugar Creek property. It’s amazing. I didn’t know there was any place like that around here.” He went on to tell me about the steep bluffs, the ridgetop that overlooked the Mississippi River, the wildflowers on the hillsides and the trout-filled stream running through the valley. “We need to go fishing there,” he said.

The summer passed, and we did not go fishing together before he returned to college in the Twin Cities. But one Saturday afternoon I got a text from him with a photo of a brown trout: “Caught this guy on my first cast today. I fished the Kinni and it was great.”

The previous summer, working on Sugar Creek Bluff, he had been awakened. He had found his own Mariposa Grove.

### Individual experiences shape attitudes

I realized then that I had worried too much about shaping my children’s attitude toward the land. What they needed was not to share my experiences, but simply to have their own experiences in their own way. My role was not to shape the experience, but just to provide the opportunity, to make sure the land is always there for them when they are ready to find it.

Our relationship to the land develops in the same way that our friendships develop. They come about at their own pace and in their own way, and the deepest friendships, those that are lifelong, tend to take shape during the formative periods of our lives, when we begin to discover who we are. This is something Emerson understood, something Muir came to understand.

A few days ago I was hiking one of the Conservancy properties. Rounding a bend in the trail, I came upon a Hmong family: parents, grandparents and two young children. The grandparents were speaking Hmong, the children were speaking English and the parents were speaking both languages. The children were excited, pointing to something they had seen on the trail, trying to explain their enthusiasm to the adults.

And I thought, the land is in good hands. The children are here, and they are falling in love, just like many generations before them. I don’t have to teach them. I don’t have to guide them. I don’t even have to understand them. I just have to trust that the land itself is calling, and they are hearing the call. 🍃

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

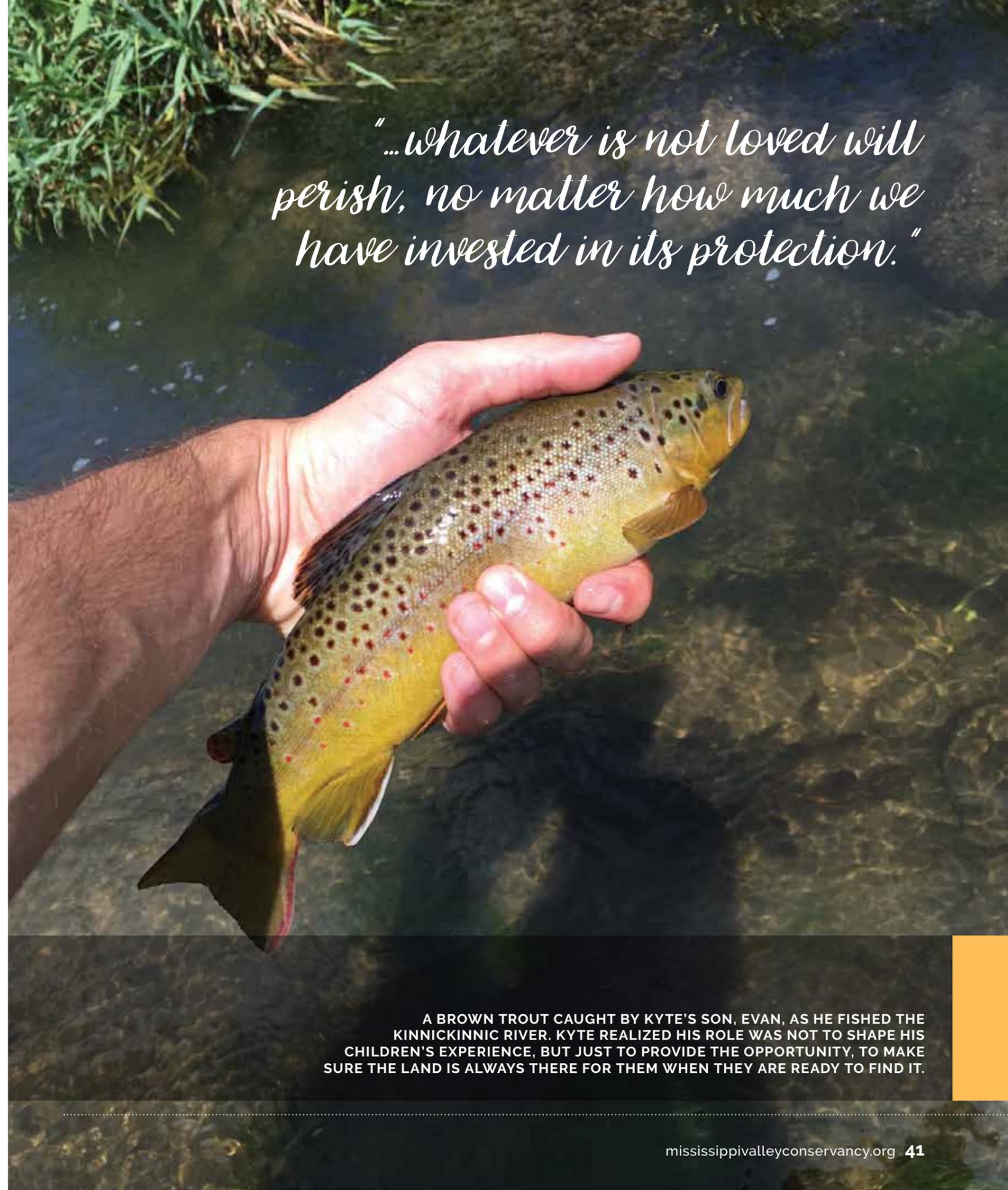
**Richard Kyte** is director of the D.B.Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership at Viterbo University and past-president of the La Crosse Chapter of Trout Unlimited.



**OUR SHARED VALUES:** One of the values embraced by Mississippi Valley Conservancy is the preservation of land for responsible recreational use such as hunting, fishing and hiking. Conserved land retains its character and provides a healthy habitat for living things. The scenic beauty of the Driftless Area is something everyone can enjoy.

Photo credit: Richard Kyte

*“...whatever is not loved will perish, no matter how much we have invested in its protection.”*



A BROWN TROUT CAUGHT BY KYTE’S SON, EVAN, AS HE FISHED THE KINNICKINNIC RIVER. KYTE REALIZED HIS ROLE WAS NOT TO SHAPE HIS CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE, BUT JUST TO PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY, TO MAKE SURE THE LAND IS ALWAYS THERE FOR THEM WHEN THEY ARE READY TO FIND IT.

# KICKAPOO INDIAN CAVERNS WERE A LABOR OF LOVE

Protection in progress

BY CAROLE PORTER



**SITE:** Kickapoo Indian Caverns

**LOCATION:** Wauzeka, Crawford County

**CONSERVED BY:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy (in the process of buying) with help from the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program

**AREA TO BE PRESERVED:** 83 acres

**OVERVIEW:** This limestone cave in Crawford County between Boscobel and Prairie du Chien is an exception to the rule in that it was once a Native American shelter. It boasts underground caverns, an underground river and onyx deposits.

My parents fell in love with the Kickapoo Indian Caverns property and purchased it in the early 1960s. They worked hard to restore the buildings and grounds in order to open the business again. The property had been abandoned years before and had overgrown back to a natural state. Once the property was ready, cavern tours were conducted from May 15 to October 15. During the summer months my father guided tours and took care of the grounds. My mother ran the trading post (filled with Native American displays created by my mother's artistic talent for color and detail) and scheduled tours. Numerous times in the off-season, we traveled across the United States and Canada to the Indian reservations to purchase from the craftsmen museum items and other items to sell in our trading post.

After I was born, my parents lost three children at birth, so I ended up as an only child. Although growing up I had my regular chores to do, I also had a lot of time to explore our woods and bluffs on horseback. I picked berries and became familiar with native plants and their uses. We always had a plethora of "pets"—the trio of squirrels whose nest fell in a storm, or the barred owl that was temporarily blinded after hitting a high line wire. My favorite was a chipmunk who rode around peeking out of my shirt pocket. All of our "pets" returned back to the wild and some returned with their own offspring to show us their successes.

I started guiding tours at age 12 and learned from my parents how the Driftless Area and our caverns were formed. This gave me a new appreciation of this already unique property.

With caves come bats and they were our favorites—including bat species found in that area only. I hope that we were successful in dispelling myths for cave

visitors that bats were not "vampires" nor did they live only to get tangled in a person's hair. Though unnecessarily feared by some people, they are so very essential to our ecosystem.

Over the years we worked as a family to open new rooms in the Caverns. The temperature in the Caverns remains at a constant 48 degrees year round and all work was manual, from carrying out pails of clay and rock, to carrying in lumber and cement for new walkways. Although it was difficult, it was a labor of love and drew us together in the process. Indian artifacts and pottery shards were excavated from the cave floor, which reinforced findings that the Kickapoo Indian tribe inhabited the area in the 1800s (or earlier).

After a brief illness, my father passed in 2001. It was his fervent wish that the land be protected from further development and left in its pristine state. My mother passed in August 2014. The land was her very heartbeat. She loved the property with her whole being and poured all of her energy into its preservation. She also asked me time and again to please keep the property in its natural state. An answer to all my family's prayers came when I was introduced to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Being the last steward of my family's property, I can now rest assured that my parents' final wishes will indeed be granted. The Conservancy will properly maintain the integrity of the Caverns and surrounding forest, and we will be assured that it will be used for research and educational purposes. 🦇

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Carole Porter** lived on the Kickapoo Indian Caverns land during her childhood. Throughout her life, she has spent countless hours helping her parents improve the land and caverns to what it is today. She is thrilled that the Conservancy will protect her family's legacy forever.



Photo credits: Heather Kaavakka (DNR); Gary Soule (page 42, top right)

# BUSINESS LEADER'S VISION, GENEROSITY, STRENGTHEN CONSERVATION EFFORT

BY DAVE SKOLODA

**P**hilip Gelatt, a 20-year backer of Mississippi Valley Conservancy, was susceptible early on to the pitch of a persuasive salesman. He had a soft spot for birds.

Gelatt, the former president, CEO and owner of Northern Engraving Corp., bought all of what Craig Thompson was selling. Thompson, who was the first vice president of the Conservancy, was selling conservation. He convinced Gelatt that a 310-acre idled farm near Holmen was the most important project he could choose to give the new land trust a strong start with a highly visible project in its mission to conserve land in the region.

Now, after more than a half million dollars donated in cash and another million in property value, Gelatt recalled with a chuckle how convincing Thompson, a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources biologist and bird expert, had been. He told me as we reminisced recently about the Conservancy's early days that he had learned during a visit in New York State about the success of a land trust in the Hudson River Valley. He asked himself, "Why can't that be done here?" As a new board member in 1997, Gelatt set out to make that happen. For starters, at an early board meeting, he wrote a check to cover the additional cost of producing our first brochure in color rather than black and white

*"If we were going to do this,  
we should do it right."*

PHILIP GELATT, AN EARLY SUPPORTER OF MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY, WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN SAVING A CRITICAL BIRD HABITAT BY FACILITATING THE PURCHASE OF THE NEW AMSTERDAM GRASSLANDS BY THE CONSERVANCY.



as we had first planned. If we were going to do this, we should do it right, he said.

I remember the windy, cold October day in 1996 when we held a news conference on Grandad Bluff to announce the formation of a new land trust. The roar of wind and the whip cracks of the flag made it hard for me to hear what Philip was saying to those of us on the Conservancy Board who huddled after the press conference in the shelter below the flag.

Gelatt was asking for input on what lands would be important for the new organization to try to protect. Among the lands discussed was a vast grassland next to Highway 35 north of Holmen that Thompson had identified as one of the last refuges and breeding sites for grassland birds in the region: bobolinks, meadowlarks and rare Henslow’s sparrows and Bell’s vireos.

Not long after that, Gelatt, who enjoys watching birds, called me and asked for a meeting with the executive committee. He told us that he wanted our assurance that the grassland project was the best choice for beginning the Conservancy’s work in the region. With our assurance that it was, he offered the Kleinsmith family to swap land Northern Engraving owned at the I-90/Hwy 53 intersection for their farmland, which was idled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

A year passed before the swap was completed. Then, following his do-it-right advice, he made contributions toward restoring prairie to the land. The Conservancy



purchased the land from Northern Engraving in 2007 with a nearly \$1 million grant from the state’s Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and the matching donation of land value. A portion is open to the public year-round, with other areas closed only during bird nesting season.

Of all the 18,500 acres permanently protected by the Conservancy in 20 years, the property Gelatt saved from housing development stands out for the extent of its transformation. The New Amsterdam Grasslands is gradually being transformed into one of the largest reconstructed prairies in the region.

The New Amsterdam Grasslands owes its new life to a business leader who had a vision for conserving land and the birds that depend on it. Gelatt’s early strong support for the grassland project and large annual contributions for operations made all the difference to our young organization’s success in building the broader support from many donors large and small that has sustained us for 20 years. 🍀

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dave Skoloda** was the first president of Mississippi Valley Conservancy and has served twice as an interim executive director.



**PROJECT:** New Amsterdam Grasslands

**LOCATION:** Holmen, La Crosse County

**LANDOWNER:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy (open to the public)

**AREA PRESERVED:** 310 acres

**OVERVIEW/VISIT:** The New Amsterdam Grasslands is owned by Mississippi Valley Conservancy. A portion is open to the public year-round, with other areas closed only during bird nesting season. Hiking and photography are allowed.

*The New Amsterdam Grasslands is gradually being transformed into one of the largest reconstructed prairies in the region.*



FROM LEFT, CRAIG THOMPSON DISCUSSES NEW AMSTERDAM GRASSLAND PRAIRIE RESTORATION WITH DAVE SKOLODA, PAT CAFFREY, VOLUNTEER LAND STEWARD FOR THE NAG, AND PHILIP GELATT.

Photo credit: Vendi Advertising

# Artist takes inspiration from Upper Mississippi Blufflands



In 2012, Sara Lubinski began a multi-year sojourn into the Upper Mississippi Blufflands, hiking goat prairies, following cold water creeks, taking in Mississippi River bluff top views and investigating algific talus slopes and the life they support. With charcoal, pencil and homemade walnut ink, she drew what she saw, recording both broad panoramas and diverse, detailed

life forms that sustain themselves in these places. She returned to her Brownsville, Minnesota studio to paint from the field drawings and numerous sketches.

The results of her explorations, a body of paintings now exceeding over 70 works, gives evidence of the beauty and diversity of natural places in her home region

and celebrates land conserved by individuals, state and federal organizations. The exhibit toured museums and art centers in Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin cities in 2016. Sara continues to explore and paint the conserved landscapes of the blufflands, sharing her journey of a life connected to the earth and to the spirit of nature in all of us. 🍃

Artwork credit: Sara Lubinski



*"A farmer's connection to the land is ingrained..."*

VISITORS TO THE FARM IN CRAWFORD COUNTY ONCE OWNED BY THE LATE BEN LOGAN LEARN ABOUT ROTATIONAL GRAZING. LOGAN, AUTHOR OF THE ICONIC BOOK "THE LAND REMEMBERS," WRITTEN ABOUT HIS CHILDHOOD ON THE FARM, PERMANENTLY PROTECTED THE FARM WITH AN EASEMENT BEFORE HE DIED IN 2014.



The accreditation seal is awarded to land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence.

### MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY BOARD OF DIRECTORS

WARREN LOVELAND - **PRESIDENT** | ROB TYSER - **VICE PRESIDENT** | DAVID R. MORRISON - **TREASURER**  
 BOB FISHER - **SECRETARY** | DAVID BANGE | ALLAN BEATTY | ANDREA BENCO | GRETCHEN BENJAMIN | PAT CAFFREY  
 JAMES CZAJKOWSKI | SUE DILLENBECK | SISTER HELEN ELSBERND | DRAKE HOKANSON | TIM JOHNSON  
 MAUREEN KINNEY | RICK LANGE | MANDY NOGLE | MIKE O'BRIEN | JON SCHULTZ | MARC SCHULTZ | DAVE SKOLODA  
 CARLA TOWNSEND | DON AND BARBARA FRANK (**EMERITUS**) | PHIL GELATT (**EMERITUS**)

### MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY STAFF

CAROL ABRAHAMZON - **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR** | ABBIE CHURCH - **CONSERVATION DIRECTOR**  
 KATHY FRISE GROTH - **OUTREACH COORDINATOR** | MEGEN KABELE - **CONSERVATION SPECIALIST**  
 LEVI PLATH - **LAND MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST** | BECCA DYMZAROV - **CONSERVATION ASSOCIATE**  
 NANCY LARSON - **OPERATIONS AND FINANCIAL MANAGER**

### OUR GENEROUS CONTRIBUTORS

MAYO CLINIC HEALTH SYSTEM - FRANCISCAN HEALTHCARE - **PRINTING**  
 VENDI ADVERTISING - **DESIGN, EDITING, PHOTOGRAPHY, CONTENT DIRECTION AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

© 2017. This magazine is published by Mississippi Valley Conservancy, a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Since 1997, more than 18,500 acres of blufflands, wetlands and streams in nine counties have been dedicated to conservation through ownership and conservation easements.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy, 1309 Norplex Dr., Suite 9, P.O. Box 2611, La Crosse, WI 54602-2611  
 608-784-3606, info@mississippivalleyconservancy.org, MississippiValleyConservancy.org

## McKnight partnership strengthens Conservancy

BY MEGEN KABELE

Photo credit: Megen Kabele

**A**s a burgeoning Land Trust in 1997, Mississippi Valley Conservancy began work by protecting the grand bluffs, prairies and natural habitats of the Coulee Region. Over the years, however, the Conservancy has received conservation easement donations that include productive farmland and pastures from numerous farm families. What the Conservancy came to realize was that landowners donate a conservation easement for

many reasons, and that working farmland was as important for landowners to conserve as natural lands.

Most who have lived on a farm can feel the land connection, though explaining this connection may be more difficult. A farmer's connection to the land is ingrained, and indeed necessary to be a successful producer. Children of farmers grow with this inherited connection to the land, recognizing

good years and bad. But living on a farm is more than production, it is truly a way of life. From early mornings in the dairy barn to hot summer days baling hay to quiet evenings in the fading light, this is the connection landowners make. This is the connection they want to preserve.

When Bonnie Wideman protected her farm in 2011, she felt confident in her decision that the farm would remain protected and undeveloped.

“Even if my children are not interested in the farming tradition here, even if they sell the land, the gift will go on. It can continue to be working farmland,” she remarked. Bonnie’s connection with the land extends to the surrounding woods and pasture. “The wildlife habitat and native features of the land will continue to be enjoyed by future owners.”

### Working in tandem to accomplish goals

As driven and eager as the Conservancy is to permanently protect land, it couldn’t have accomplished its goals without significant partnerships. In the early years of the Conservancy, The McKnight Foundation—a Minnesota-based organization—recognized the importance of protecting blufflands from the long arm of residential and commercial development. Through a grant from McKnight, the Conservancy was able to work with other land trusts in a group called the Blufflands Alliance and acquire the first block of lands in east La Crosse. Fast forward 20 years and the McKnight Foundation continues to be a supportive partner for the Conservancy by providing funds to improve water quality in the Upper Mississippi River basin.

“McKnight continues to be impressed with the Conservancy’s breadth of partnerships and creative approaches to achieving goals,” said Mark Muller, Mississippi River program officer for the McKnight Foundation. “I particularly appreciate that the Conservancy is exploring ways to protect fragile lands while maintaining agricultural production.”

### Outreach efforts connect agencies to farmers

With support from The McKnight Foundation, the Conservancy has led an outreach campaign to connect with farmers and landowners in the

Kickapoo Watershed of Monroe, Vernon, Crawford and Richland counties. The Conservancy’s staff have conducted dozens of site visits to discuss improved conservation practices on native lands and farmlands and encouraged landowners to permanently protect conservation efforts through a conservation agreement. Response to the outreach campaign has been strong and efforts have expanded to adjacent watersheds of the Bad Axe and Coon Creek. By working with longtime partners such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Valley Stewardship Network, University of Wisconsin-Extension, the Wallace Foundation, and Kickapoo Grazing Initiative, the Conservancy is increasing awareness about existing and forthcoming conservation programs and financial incentives through private, county, state and federal entities.

The Conservancy understands that not all landowners they visit will place a conservation easement on their farm. But with each contact, landowners can learn more about what is possible: how conservation improvements and protection can happen and who can help. Through this connection, the Conservancy is building long-term relationships with individuals and the community.

As the Conservancy moves into the next 20 years, development pressures will increase. Land subdivision will continue. Agricultural markets will reflect a changing economy and environment. And the Conservancy will be there to protect natural lands as well as working farmlands for stronger rural communities and future generations. 🍃

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Megen Kabele** is a conservation specialist with Mississippi Valley Conservancy.



Photo credit: Megen Kabele



*“...the land will continue to be enjoyed by future owners.”*

ABOVE, BONNIE WIDEMAN OVERLOOKS HER SHEEP HERD ON HER FARM, PROTECTED SINCE 2011. BELOW, A VIEW OF THE KICKAPOO RIVER, AN AREA OF OUTREACH FOR THE CONSERVANCY.





BUFFALO

TREMPEALEAU

JACKSON

LA CROSSE

MONROE

VERNON

RICHLAND

CRAWFORD

GRANT

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY OPERATES IN NINE COUNTIES IN THE UNGLACIATED DRIFTLESS AREA OF SOUTHWESTERN WISCONSIN.

WORKING ALONGSIDE PRIVATE LANDOWNERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES ON VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION PROJECTS, WE HAVE PERMANENTLY CONSERVED MORE THAN 18,000 ACRES OF BLUFFLANDS, PRAIRIES, WETLANDS, FARMLANDS AND STREAMS SINCE OUR FOUNDING IN 1997.

# 6 Steps to Forever Land

Forming a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy

## STEP 1: SITE VISIT

The Conservancy sets up a site visit to evaluate and discuss the ecological and legal qualifications of each property.

## STEP 2: APPROVAL

Staff presents the project to the Conservancy's Land Protection and Management Committee for a recommendation and to the full Board of Directors for approval.

## STEP 3: MAKING A PLAN

Landowners fill out a "Personalizing Your Plan" worksheet with their specific wishes for the future land uses of the property.

## STEP 4: DRAFT EASEMENT

The Conservancy uses the worksheet and property evaluation to create a first draft conservation easement.

## STEP 5: DOCUMENTATION

The Conservancy reviews the title history of the property and maps, photographs and documents all natural resources, boundaries and land uses of the site.

## STEP 6: PERMANENCE

The easement is recorded at the register of deeds. The land remains privately owned and protected in perpetuity. The Conservancy visits annually.



## WHAT IS A CONSERVATION EASEMENT, AND WHY WOULD I WANT ONE?

A conservation easement is a legal agreement that limits the rights of future landowners to use the property for mining, subdivision or residential development. Public access is not a requirement, and the landowner may benefit from a reduction in income or estate taxes. The landowner retains other rights of land ownership, which may include agricultural production and timber harvest. The land may be sold or passed on to heirs. Landowners have the satisfaction of knowing that regardless of who owns the land in the future, it cannot be destroyed, leaving a legacy for future generations.

Photo credit: Verndt Advertising

Thank you for traveling this journey with us. If you haven't been a past supporter, join us today and be a leader for tomorrow.

#### MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

\$1,000+ GUARDIAN

\$500 CONSERVATOR

\$250 PROTECTOR

\$100 PRESERVER

\$50 STEWARD

To join, call 608-784-3606, visit [MississippiValleyConservancy.org](http://MississippiValleyConservancy.org) or send a check to:

Mississippi Valley Conservancy  
P.O. Box 2611  
La Crosse, WI 54602-2611

Gifts above and beyond membership are incredibly important and can be made in many ways. For information on other ways to give, call us at 608-784-3606 or visit us online at [MississippiValleyConservancy.org](http://MississippiValleyConservancy.org).

## Leading Mississippi Valley Conservancy Into the Future

AN INVITATION FROM BOARD PRESIDENT WARREN LOVELAND AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CAROL ABRAHAMZON

### We both have a favorite quote.

"We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."  
~ Aldo Leopold

### We agree on many things:

- » Conserving land for the future is the top priority for Mississippi Valley Conservancy.
- » Bringing plants and animals back to their natural homes in the prairies, rivers and forests.
- » Teaching our children to take an interest in the land, to be comfortable in and embrace nature.

These are all things the Conservancy has been working on for the past 20 years.

But the most important thing we agree on is that we have to look and lead to the future. We have to

think about our landscape 20, 100, 200 years from now. How will what we're doing today impact the future?

The future of the land, the plants, the animals and our children?

**We lead** into the future by listening. We listen to landowners, communities who use the land and we listen to the land itself.

**We lead** by learning. We ask questions and learn from farmers, researchers, foresters, hikers, birders and you, our supporters.

**We lead** forward by creating solutions. We don't wait for someone else to figure it out; we roll up our sleeves, look for solutions, work with partners and get the job done.

The future of land conservation is bright and the Conservancy is ready to be in the lead. 🍃

Warren Loveland  
BOARD PRESIDENT



Carol Abrahamzon  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Photo credit: Vendi Advertising

## Why wait to get your mobility back?



### Helping you get back to enjoying the beautiful Driftless Area of Southwest Wisconsin we call home.

At Mayo Clinic Health System, restoring function is a highly coordinated effort involving all orthopedic disciplines: surgeons, rehabilitation specialists and therapists all working toward a common goal. Close collaboration produces new ways to restore function, relieve pain and speed healing.

For a consultation, call 608-392-9876

Franciscan Healthcare in La Crosse  
[mayoclinichealthsystem.org](http://mayoclinichealthsystem.org)



*The land. Our future.*



Fine art print courtesy of Sara Lubinski. See page 48 and visit [SaraLubinski.com](http://SaraLubinski.com).

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY, PO BOX 2611, LA CROSSE, WI 54602-2611  
608-784-3606 • [INFO@MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG](mailto:INFO@MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG)  
[MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG](http://MISSISSIPPIVALLEYCONSERVANCY.ORG)