



Conservancy Notes †
FALL 2025

Beauty, biodiversity and belonging: The future of Wandering Rock State Natural Area

By Karen Solverson

There's a new reason to celebrate conservation in the Driftless Area—and it's all thanks to the power of community, collaboration, and donors like you.

On June 11, 2025, Mississippi Valley Conservancy officially accepted ownership of 162 stunning acres of blufflands, oak woodlands, and rare prairies along the Mississippi River in Nelson, Wisconsin. This effort was made possible through a collaborative partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, and ensures the preservation of a vital piece of our region's

natural heritage for generations of wildlife, outdoor enthusiasts, and future conservationists.

Now known as Wandering Rock State Natural Area, this breathtaking place in Buffalo County is more than a protected landscape—it's a thriving haven for wildlife, a scenic destination for outdoor lovers, and a symbol of what's possible when we work together to protect the places we love.

The journey to safeguard this land began more than

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Situated near Nelson, WI, Wandering Rock State Natural Area offers rich habitat for wildlife and peaceful trails for community members and visitors to Buffalo County. (Photo by Karen Solverson)

Some of the best adventures begin when you lose the trail

A message from Carol

Wandering is a gift.

In the adventure racing events I've been participating in lately, my team is meant to move with precision—map in hand, eyes on the next checkpoint. But sometimes, we drift off course. We wander. And in those moments, we discover the unexpected.

That same magic lives at Wandering Rock, our newest protected treasure. The name holds many meanings. It's tied to the fact that the rocks themselves literally move over time. It's also a nod to the river that meanders through the valley below.

And, perhaps most poetically, it honors the majestic peregrine falcon—whose name in Latin means “wandering falcon.” This remarkable bird, arguably the fastest animal on Earth and endangered in Wisconsin, is one of the key reasons protecting this property was so important.

This place is safe forever because of you. You made it possible for us to be there, ready, when the time was right. Thank you!

I hope you, too, will find time to wander—to follow a winding trail, to look up in wonder, and to feel at home in the wild.

Whether at Wandering Rock or another preserve you've helped protect, take the time to enjoy the wonder of nature, close to home.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director



Photo by Diane Mollers

Boots to blog: Hiking the Driftless Trails

By Kelly Sultzbach

With a broad hat and a smile to match, Marge Loch-Wouters didn't seem to mind that I was unfamiliar with several blooms we saw on one of her favorite local trails. She bent down to show me the T-Rex leaves of the prairie coreopsis and encouraged my delight in the humble harebell and pale spiked lobelia. Marge picked this trail as if choosing a good book for me—I was looking for a bit of wooded shade on a hot day but also a splash of prairie wildflowers thrown in for drama.

It didn't surprise me to learn that Marge is a retired librarian. Her blog, "Hiking the Driftless Trails," puts all sorts of enticing information at your fingertips, guiding visitors to find their own adventure with clear trail information for any ability level, whether you are an avid trekker or a mom needing paved paths for strollers. She shared, "Your experience is not 'less' because you haven't made the climb to the top or done 20 miles." Marge described the flat terrain of the Conservancy-protected Holland Sand Prairie as wading into "languorous prairie time, with waving oceans of bergamot and coneflower."



To support citizen science, Marge documents local flora at Holland Sand Prairie by uploading plant photos to iNaturalist. (Photo by Karen Solverson)

Although her blog features a photo of her on a craggy outlook, poles joyfully aloft as if holding hands with bluff and river, she began seeking a deeper connection to nature while recovering from a serious health issue. First, she joined the Driftless Drifters hiking group, sharing in the excitement of others who could find an inky cap mushroom. Next, she gave herself the birthday gift of a Master Naturalist course. Now, she lends her expertise to civic groups

as well as blog readers. Marge explains, "Getting back to nature was healing not just my body but my spirit, too." Her blog invites others to find that fulfillment as well.

Reading "Hiking the Driftless Trails" offers many ways to read nature from a new perspective. Want a species scavenger hunt? Check out her "I Spy" pages. Want to find a new way to chart a lifetime of environmental learning? Model your notes on her phenological journal entries tracing years of super-blooms and temperature changes. You don't have to go it alone, either! There are monthly lists of exactly when and where to join group events so that you can share and learn from others. Marge's capacious knowledge is blended with lyrical descriptions, too, which will help you see the "Goldberry-washed freshness" in a rainy day.

Marge may have gone from boots to blog, but she created a mutualistic feedback loop: you'll want to go from blog to boots! Whether you're a climber or an ambler, or simply want to heal a restless heart with migrating birds and a molten sunset at Sugar Creek Bluff or one of the other Conservancy nature preserves, "Hiking the Driftless Trails" makes you want to get out there again and again. Visit her blog at <https://hikingdriftlesstrails.blogspot.com/>.



Conservancy supporter Marge Loch-Wouters gets out on the trails as often as she can. (Photo by Kelly Sultzbach)



By purposely slowing down and looking closely, Marge often discovers interesting flora and fauna such as this margined calligrapher fly on grooved flax. (Photo by Marge Loch-Wouters)

Wandering Rock... (continued from cover)

fifteen years ago, when local landowners Dwight and Aimee Hemion first reached out to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. While the path forward took time—and with the heartbreaking loss of Dwight along the way—the dream never faded. In May of 2012, with steadfast help from our partners at The Nature Conservancy and the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, the land was held by The Nature Conservancy until it could officially become part of our protected lands in June 2025.

“We are thrilled to transfer ownership of this property to longtime partner and conservation leader Mississippi Valley Conservancy,” said Elizabeth Koehler, state director of the Wisconsin chapter of The Nature Conservancy. “We know the property will be in good hands, and we can’t wait to see the long-term benefits of active management and restoration on the site. This new investment of time, expertise, and funding will provide benefits for nature and the local community for generations to come.”

Today, this incredible site links with other protected lands to form a 400-acre corridor of vital wildlife habitat along the Mississippi River flyway—a rare and remarkable achievement. It’s a place where peregrine falcons soar, red-headed woodpeckers

chatter, and dry bluff prairies—some of Wisconsin’s rarest habitats—are getting a new chance to thrive.

Planned restoration efforts will only be possible with help from our supporters. Restoration efforts require equipment, fuel, staff time, and a long-term dedication to creating a thriving environment for both wildlife and people. Local hikers, hunters, birdwatchers, and nature lovers all benefit from enhanced access to this breathtaking landscape. Located along the Great River Road, the property is viewed by tens of thousands of travelers each year and contributes significantly to the region’s scenic beauty—making conservation efforts here especially valuable to the local economy and recreational users. Mississippi Valley Conservancy’s ongoing work to protect this land aligns with The Nature Conservancy’s mission to conserve land and habitat and to offer the public meaningful opportunities to experience and engage with nature.

Your generosity and continued support make this possible.

“This is exactly what conservation should look like—neighbors and organizations coming together to protect what’s special,” shared Carol Abrahamzon, executive director of Mississippi Valley Conservancy. “With every gift, every volunteer hour, every voice raised in support of land protection, you’re helping

Land manager Levi Plath discusses restoration plans for the dry bluff prairie and oak savanna with restoration ecologist Michael Reitz earlier this year.



our bluffs and prairies stay wild and beautiful for the future.”

With Wandering Rock now entrusted to us, the real magic begins: restoring prairies, opening trails, removing invasive brush, and bringing fire back to the land to help it thrive, just as nature intended. “Prairies evolved with people and require our help to persist,” shared Mitchel Block, conservation specialist at Mississippi Valley Conservancy. “We prioritize the use of prescribed fire and proactive management to ensure these complex and diverse natural communities not only survive, but can thrive and expand.”

That’s where you come in.

We’re inviting our community to help shape the future of Wandering Rock. Whether by joining a work party, contributing to our habitat restoration fund, or simply sharing the story with friends, there’s a role for everyone in this next chapter of conservation.

“For generations, this land has been in good hands. Now, together, we can ensure it flourishes,” said Abrahamzon. “Every step



Above: Volunteers from the Raptor Resource Project collect data from three peregrine falcon chicks who are now learning to hunt at Wandering Rock. After nearly being eradicated in the 1970s from ingesting DDT, this state endangered species is slowly making a comeback—nesting at several Conservancy-protected properties. (Contributed photo) Lower left: Scarlet tanager and other migratory birds need protected spaces like Wandering Rock to raise their young. (Photo by Connor Kotte)

forward is made possible by people who care—people like you.”

Thanks to you, Wandering Rock will remain a place of beauty, biodiversity, and belonging. We’re honored to continue this work with you at our side—restoring the land, inviting the community in, and nurturing the promise of conservation. Let’s keep protecting what makes the Driftless Region so extraordinary—together.

Make a difference close to home

Volunteer at
Wandering Rock



Support long-term
restoration



Share the story
with a friend



Take a hike with
someone special



Donations can be made by phone at (608) 784-3606 or by mail at Mississippi Valley Conservancy, P.O. Box 2611, La Crosse, WI 54602

From tent to tribute

Widow honors husband's legacy by protecting 63 acres in Crawford County

By Dave Skoloda

When Alan Slavick and Shirley Northern first arrived in Crawford County, they pitched a tent on a parcel of rugged Driftless land that held all the promise of a future homestead: south-facing hills, fresh springs, a meandering creek, and the remnants of foundations waiting to be rebuilt. What began as 20 acres grew into a 64-acre labor of love—a sanctuary shaped over decades by Al's hard work and deep connection to the land. Today, that land is permanently protected from development through a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy—a tribute to Al's legacy and Shirley's determination to carry it forward.

The couple's journey began humbly, with nothing but raw land and vision. Al built the structures they needed, restored prairie, cleared invasive brush, and carefully stewarded the natural communities that flourished under their care. After his death in 2020, Shirley, now 77, remained committed to honoring

the homestead and the landscape they had nurtured together.

"Every time something new blooms I think of Al and wish that he could be here to see it," Shirley said recently, as cream baptisia and shooting stars lit up the prairie. Among her favorite reminders are the Michigan lilies Al planted—a species that takes five years to flower. Only a few had flowered before his passing, but today more than 30 stand in bloom.

The property is ecologically significant and includes 0.6 miles of Nederlo Creek, a Class I and II trout stream, that is part of the Tainter Creek watershed flowing into the Kickapoo River. It borders a Crawford County Conservation District property that includes a retention dam. A portion of the property is covered by a DNR hunting and fishing easement which also covers some neighboring property. Together with that property, this creates a protected corridor of over 200 contiguous acres. The land also contains prime agricultural soils currently



used for haying and rotational grazing.

“The Slavick property is a diverse array of natural communities that has been carefully stewarded for decades,” said Chris Kirkpatrick, conservation manager for Mississippi Valley Conservancy. “It includes impressive acreage of oak woodland, including an area of open understory—a sight once common in the Driftless Area but now increasingly rare due to a lack of natural fire.” The state-endangered purple milkweed is now thriving on this property, thanks to years of habitat restoration—including brush and invasive species removal, prescribed burns, and careful thinning of trees in its native oak openings and woodlands.

Each conservation easement the Conservancy completes is tailored to the land and landowner. In this case, the easement designates space for continued residential use and farming but permanently prohibits subdivision, development, and mining. Shirley continues Al’s legacy by weeding out invasive plants, and this spring she worked with neighbors to burn the prairie, oak opening, and oak woodland, ensuring that the ecological integrity of the property endures for generations.

Community has always been part of this property's story. Neighbors helped with a barn raising—capped

with a square dance and a barn full of hay. More recently, Shirley welcomed students from Viroqua's Driftless Folk School and Thoreau College for a workshop on working with oxen. “They thought the land was beautiful,” Shirley said, “so it’s not just me.”

Thanks to Shirley’s vision and dedication, the land remains private but is now a permanent refuge for wildlife and wildflowers and a living memorial to her husband’s care. “The protection is a tribute to Al,” she said. “This way, more people will enjoy and appreciate it.”

Through Shirley’s generosity and unwavering commitment, Al’s legacy will live on in every bloom and birdcall. This easement is more than a legal agreement—it’s a love letter to a life well-lived, a landscape well-tended, and a future where the beauty and biodiversity of the Driftless Region are safeguarded for all. In protecting this land, Shirley has not only honored the past, she has offered a lasting gift to the generations still to come.

Left: Shirley looks over the prairie her late husband created, which includes prairie dock, compass plant, rosinweed and white indigo. (Photo by Chris Kirkpatrick)

Middle: Scenic view of the farmstead from Nederlo Creek, a Class I & II trout stream as it flows through the property. (Photo by LuAnn Juran)

Right: Al Slavick and Shirley Northern take a break after conducting a prescribed burn on their neighbor's property. (Photo by LuAnn Juran)



When birds speak

A story of listening, learning, and stewardship

By Karen Solverson

Each spring and summer, the fields of New Amsterdam Grasslands come alive with more than prairie blooms and rustling grasses. They sing.

Those songs—of clay-colored sparrows, Bell’s vireos, meadowlarks, and sedge wrens—are more than beautiful; they are data points in a long-term story of land, resilience, and restoration. This year, as the Conservancy’s 2025 bird survey concludes, we not only gain insight into what species are thriving or struggling, we also see the value of careful conservation planning and the power of volunteers and partners who help shape the future of this special place.

Since 2001, dedicated volunteers—starting with Jean Ruhser, then Kathy Carlyle and now Rob Tyser—have been surveying bird species across the 310-acre New Amsterdam Grasslands preserve, one of the first properties protected by the Conservancy. Using fixed transects and standardized survey methods, their work has created one of the longest-running local bird monitoring datasets in western Wisconsin. Conservancy board member and survey volunteer Rob Tyser said, “Because of its great agricultural value, tallgrass prairie is perhaps the most endangered habitat type in North America, so it’s a bit amazing that the Conservancy has managed to protect this 300+ acre grassland. I’m grateful that this habitat will be available for grassland plants and animals to use in perpetuity.”

This year’s survey revealed some mixed news. Many grassland species, such as the once-abundant Henslow’s sparrows and savanna sparrows, have declined from their earlier peaks. These declines are likely due to a combination of factors occurring beyond Conservancy lands—such as shrinking migratory stopover and wintering habitat—but also reflect local changes in vegetation. As management efforts have allowed, native prairie species have matured and outcompeted the agricultural smooth brome,



Left: Bell's vireos thrive on a mosaic of grassland and shrubby habitat. Middle: The Grasslands. (Photos by Dan Jackson) Right: A Henslow's sparrow perches carefully depend on protected, carefully managed habitat to survive. (Photo by Gwyn Calvetti)

the landscape has shifted to taller and denser vegetation, which may not favor certain ground-nesting birds. However, most species seem to have adjusted nicely to their new native prairie surroundings.

Meanwhile, the clay-colored sparrow—still the most frequently observed species—continues to use the grasslands in good numbers, though with a gradual decline since its peak in the mid-2010s. “New Amsterdam Grasslands is the last large block of grassland left in the highly-developed La Crosse area,” said Levi Plath, land manager at Mississippi Valley Conservancy. “Despite our best efforts, many grassland birds are still declining, making places like this more important than ever for their survival.”

And yet, hope is also singing. Bell’s vireos, a species of high conservation concern, are increasing steadily—particularly along areas with scattered shrubs and edge habitat. This is true for other shrub-loving species like field sparrows, brown thrashers, and willow flycatchers, which have all shown encouraging population growth over the past decade. These increases validate a key component of the site’s management plan: maintaining a mosaic of grassland and shrubby habitat, especially along historic fence lines and near brushy areas adjacent to Highway 53.

“Bell’s vireos like clumps of thick brush, especially ones overgrown with vines,” site steward Pat Caffrey shared. “The patches should be at least 100 square meters in size, as brown-headed cowbirds tend to find and lay eggs in nests in smaller patches. We



clay-colored sparrow is the most frequently observed species at New Amsterdam at New Amsterdam Grasslands—one of several declining grassland species that

mow rather than burn to control expanding brush around the patches to keep a “green edge” on the clumps, which also helps hide the nests. People often see the strange mowing patterns along Highway 53 and wonder why we do that, and it is because Bell’s like thick brush clumps to cover 20% to 40% of the area, with the balance being open grassland.”

Behind the scenes of these thoughtful mowing patterns and habitat decisions is a dedicated site steward, Pat Caffrey. Pat’s careful attention to where birds nest, how vegetation responds, and when to mow or hold back, has made him an invaluable part of the stewardship team. The Conservancy relies on volunteer site stewards like Pat, as his knowledge and care are essential to turning good management plans into meaningful on-the-ground action.

As the landscape evolves, so must our management strategies. New Amsterdam Grasslands had been used for agriculture prior to acquisition by the Conservancy. After acquisition, portions of the property were planted with a native prairie, and the management and scientific studies began. One of the central challenges at New Amsterdam Grasslands is balancing the needs of brush-dependent species like Bell’s vireo, with the need to preserve open grassland for species like Henslow’s sparrows that avoid woody vegetation.

Ongoing management will include:

- Selective brush patch retention by mowing around the patches in designated areas to benefit vireos,

flycatchers, and thrashers;

- Prescribed fire and mowing property-wide to reduce woody encroachment and to maintain grassland structure for species like grasshopper sparrows and sedge wrens, while maintaining areas with more than two years of thatch for Henslow’s sparrow nesting;
- Monitoring predator presence (like domestic cats or dogs) that could threaten ground-nesting birds;
- Enhanced partnerships with neighboring land-owners and organizations to advocate for grassland-friendly practices beyond the preserve’s borders, supporting birds that migrate and overwinter far from Wisconsin.

This kind of adaptive, science-driven stewardship is only possible with consistent monitoring, something that depends on the time, expertise, and heart of volunteers like Rob, who has logged countless hours in the field since he started monitoring in 2009, binoculars in hand and notebook at the ready. “The heart and soul of this organization is about the long-term conservation of plants and animals,” Tyser shared. “The Conservancy is a science-based organization, and its practices seek to be informed by useful conservation data, and I like being able to provide some of this data.”

Every species counted, every trend line drawn from a set of data, is a reminder that conservation takes time, patience, and people who care. The more we know, the more we are able to pivot while continuing to move forward with our goal of improving the best possible habitat for wildlife. New Amsterdam Grasslands continues to be a laboratory of learning and a haven for birds because of the foresight of our founders and the persistence of our supporters.

As a donor to Mississippi Valley Conservancy, you are part of this story. Your generosity allows us to not only protect places like New Amsterdam but to manage them with purpose—and to listen closely when the birds speak. In the years ahead, we look forward to restoring even more habitat, learning even more from our winged neighbors, and sharing those stories with you.

Because when birds thrive, we all do.

Farmland preservation and a mother's memory

By Abbie Church

On January 22, 2004, Doris Michelson signed up for a membership to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. At that time, she had been thinking a lot about her farm in La Crosse County, a farm that had provided a lifetime of happy memories since the day she moved into the century-old farmhouse as a young bride in 1943. Doris had been thinking about what would happen to the farm in the future, and how to ensure it could continue to remain as farmland when so much of the surrounding landscape was being developed into residential lots.



Doris's new membership provided the opportunity for her to receive our newsletter, which described other landowners in the area who had protected their land through conservation easements, and Doris continued learning more and thinking about what the future would hold.

With a rich history of hard work and special family memories, the farmland had been in the Michelson family since 1879. Doris shared, "It is very good land, and the family wants to keep it... My husband and I arranged family picnics to different locations

around this farm. That is one of many reasons each one of our children is devoted to it." Doris passed in 2020 at the age of 103, without realizing her dream of ensuring the farm was protected. This summer, nearly two decades after she joined the Conservancy, her five children, Jim, Bob, Mary, Elizabeth, and Steve, made her dream a reality by conveying a conservation easement in memory of their parents.

At the urging of her children and grandchildren, Doris kept a detailed record of her memories throughout the years. "From my kitchen window, I gaze out over the ever-changing seasonal scenery," Doris reminisced. "Here I see the bare dark branches of winter, often covered with snow, change to the buds growing into the new leaves in spring and summer. Later they turn into the glorious reds, yellows, and golds of the fall. The fields, too, change from fall brown to winter white, soon to be followed by light brown. Spring soon replaces this with the light green of the new crops. The deeper green of the growing corn, soybeans, or hay is soon followed by the fall show again. I have seen deer, coyotes, hawks, buzzards, eagles, and turkeys as well as our domestic animals from this vantage point. One evening several years ago I looked up from the sink to see a pretty doe gazing at me with inquiring eyes."

"When the children were growing up, we lived a busy farm life," Doris wrote. "We had cows, hogs, and sometimes chickens. We raised hay, corn, tobacco and strawberries to sell, so there was always plenty to do. My husband was a good farmer, and we often took time to picnic at some spot on the farm or perhaps have a wiener roast or marshmallow roast in the evening. From the time the children were quite small they loved going to the barn to 'help' at chore time. They learned to shake up the bedding and put the milking machine straps on and take them off of the cows. They learned to wash the cows' udders for milking and eventually how to put the milking machines on and off and feed the cows."

With their parents' wishes in mind, her children worked with the Conservancy to convey a conservation easement to ensure that the scenic views from the farmhouse window, or for passersby on the local roads, as well as opportunities to keep the land in agricultural production, will continue to be avail-

able to future generations. The land will continue to be privately owned, and the easement places limitations on future building construction and subdivision, regardless of who owns the land in the future.

As conservation director for the Conservancy, I noted several special features of the property during my visit. The soils on this farm are ideal for agricultural use, with some silt loam soils designated as prime farmland and others as farmland of state-wide importance according to the Federal Register. The family recently completed a pollinator planting with yellow coneflowers, bergamot, black-eyed Susan, and other native wildflowers to support bees, butterflies, and other wildlife.

Their farm also includes diverse woodlands—home to indigo buntings, scarlet tanagers, and Baltimore orioles—and a winding creek designated as a Class I trout stream. The songbirds Doris described in her memoirs echoed around us on our visit; it was truly moving to see the land she loved so vividly brought to



life through her words and the care her family has shown.

This new easement joins those of two other adjacent landowners who have protected their farmland with the Conservancy, creating a corridor of nearly 300 acres of protected farmland. This effort supports the comprehensive plans of the Town of Hamilton and La Crosse County, both of which include goals of protecting open space and agricultural lands.

The Michelson family's decision to protect their farm honors not

only the memory of Doris and her husband but also the values they instilled across generations—love of the land, commitment to family, and care for the future. Thanks to their dedication, the farm will continue to thrive as a place of nourishment for both people and wildlife, just as Doris envisioned from her kitchen window. Their choice reflects what's possible when families come together to care for the land—and leave a gift for generations to come.

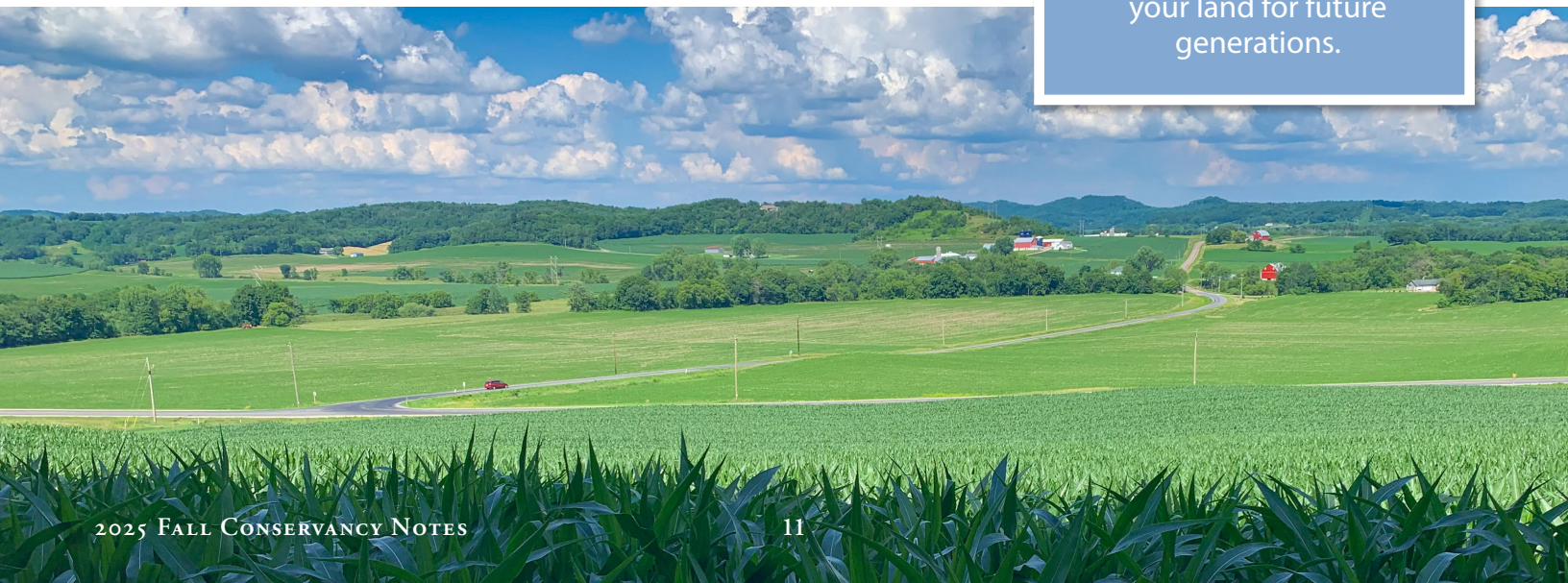
Facing page: Clifford, son Jim, and Doris Michelson in a contributed photo from 1998.

Left: Standing in front of the homestead, the Michelson family celebrates the preservation of their family farm. (Left to right: Elizabeth Rusch, Jim Michelson, Steve Michelson, Bob & Julie Michelson, George & Mary Baumgartner) (Photo by Carol Abrahamson)

Below: Farmland preservation is a priority for the Michelson family, ensuring these rich fields are available for agricultural production far into the future. (Photo by Chris Kirkpatrick)

Your land. Your legacy.

You can ensure your land stays farmland or natural habitat—**forever**. Visit the website at MississippiValleyConservancy.org to learn how a conservation easement can protect your land for future generations.



How to support conservation even if you don't own land

By Kelly Sultzbach

Not everyone has acres of land to protect or manage—but that doesn't mean you can't make a big difference for conservation. Whether you live in town, rent your home, or simply want to do more for nature in your everyday life, there are plenty of ways to support a healthier planet and a more sustainable future.

Conservancy volunteers Kay, Jan, Kelly, and Krista suggested some creative and meaningful ways to support conservation efforts—no land ownership required:

1. Volunteer with local conservation organizations

Getting involved is as simple as raising your hand. Volunteers are essential to conservation success and there are opportunities to suit every interest and ability. Whether you enjoy writing, working outdoors, or lending a hand behind the scenes, you can:

- ☑ Help with office tasks like stuffing envelopes or event preparation.
- ☑ Join restoration efforts by pulling invasive species like garlic mustard at nature preserves.
- ☑ Assist with unique projects such as wildlife monitoring or tagging fish through partner organizations.

Look into local conservation groups and nature centers to see where your time and talents are needed most.

2. Make conservation a home practice

Small lifestyle changes add up when it comes to conservation:

- ☑ Shop secondhand—thrift stores and resale shops offer great finds and help keep usable goods out of the landfill.
- ☑ Learn to fix instead of toss—repaired clothing, appliances, and furniture stay in use longer and reduce waste.
- ☑ Compost food scraps or check out local composting programs in your city.
- ☑ Eliminate invasive species in your yard and landscaping.

If you're feeling adventurous, help rescue recyclables that have been mistakenly tossed in the trash!

3. Support pollinators—even in small spaces

You don't need a large garden to help pollinators thrive. Plant native wildflowers in window boxes, install a bee hotel on your balcony, and encourage friends and neighbors to join in. Small-scale efforts can create powerful habitat corridors for butterflies, bees, and other beneficial insects.



Rusty patched bumblebee by Dan Jackson

4. Shop locally and think sustainably

Supporting conservation can start at the grocery store:

- ☑ Visit local farmers markets to reduce food miles and packaging waste, and to support the agricultural community.
- ☑ Choose reusable bags, buy in bulk, and reduce single-use plastics whenever possible.

5. Inspire others by modeling conservation values

One of the most powerful tools for conservation is example:

- ☑ Take kids and grandkids outdoors—whether for mushroom hunting (with landowner permission) or just catching bugs with a net and a jar, these moments plant seeds of environmental awareness.
- ☑ Support public policies that protect natural resources—like the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund or local land-use protections.
- ☑ Join conservation-minded community groups.

Conservation isn't just about property lines—it's about a shared commitment to the land, water, wildlife, and communities that make our region special. Whether your contribution is time, talent, advocacy, or daily action, you're part of the solution.

Conservation close to home starts with you.

Book review

Beaverland by Leila Philip

By Frank Dravis

John Jacob Astor, Lewis and Clark, Thomas Jefferson, and the beaver—yes, thanks to the brilliant work of Leila Philip, the common beaver belongs amidst that auspicious assemblage. To varying degrees, those crucial American actors owe their fame, in part, to the beaver. In *Beaverland*, Philip lays out her case for why the beaver's beneficial significance to North America did not end with the nineteenth century but continues into the future.

The subtitle, *How One Weird Rodent Made America*, is appropriate on several levels, not least of which is the beaver's mysterious ability to engineer the construction and maintenance of dams with the communal help of other beavers. While lengthy, at 287 pages, the book makes for a fascinating read—it contains not just beaver behavior, but also about American economics, history, and rural culture. These creatures, once numbering in the hundreds of millions, were central to the fur trade economy that, in part, bankrolled the colonization of North America and built financial empires. Philip traces how the lust for pelts fueled land grabs, displacement of Indigenous peoples, and ecological transformation—not unlike gold or oil in other eras.

Philip dives into the science of beaver-based restoration—a practice now gaining traction with surprising speed. The creature's natural behavior of dam-building, pond-forming, and water-slowing is becoming an accepted strategy for climate adaptation. From wildfire mitigation in California to drought resistance in the High Plains, the beaver may be one of our best-kept ecological secrets. Witness a \$1.2 million-dollar project in the Czech Republic: www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/beaver-dam-czech-republic. Government planners, delayed for seven years by building permits and unable to implement a restoration project, were spared the task and the cost of the construction by a crew of eight beavers that constructed the dams for them in the required locations. The furry critters are not big on paperwork, though their engineering passes



the ecological aesthetics test.

No treatise on beavers is complete without discussing the politics of land use and animal control, particularly in the current era of increasing dam removal policies. Philip doesn't shy away from them, but her treatment of the subject remains open-minded and objective. There's humor, too—how could there not be, in a book featuring chunky, waddling, tail-slapping rodents? That image is true on land; however, in the water their transformation to sleek torpedoes is complete.

In the end, *Beaverland* is more than just a book about beavers. It's a rumination on how humans once lived with the land and how we might again, if we're willing to coexist and encourage nature's most capable engineer. The popular subject of TikTok memes, beavers munching broccoli, their noses practically in the camera, attests to the true aura of the critter that Leila so aptly captured. Whether you're a nature buff, history scholar, or policy critic, *Beaverland* is a must-read if you seek a true understanding of how the beaver fits in humanity's future.

Protecting the bluffs, together

Conservancy transfers 80 acres to City of Onalaska

By Karen Solverson

A shared vision for protecting the Driftless Area's scenic bluffs and natural heritage has led to a collaborative conservation project between Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the City of Onalaska. In an impactful collaboration formalized through the Onalaska Natural Lands Protection Program, this partnership highlights the mutual benefits between the conservation efforts of the Conservancy—a private nonprofit land trust—and the City, a public municipality that has prioritized the retention of green space and wildlife habitat for the local community.

On August 14, 2025, the Conservancy donated 80 acres of bluffland to the City for ownership and management. A condition of the land donation was that the Conservancy has retained a conservation easement ensuring that the future use of the property is for the benefit of area wildlife.

Known for now as the French Road Property, the site includes rugged dry cliffs, globally vulnerable prairie remnants, and rare oak woodlands perched above the Mississippi River valley. This project connects the property to existing parklands within the City of Onalaska's Greenway boundary and further enhances the scenic character of the region. Visible from major roadways like I-90 and Highway 16, the preserved landscape will provide accessible recreational and educational opportunities to the public for generations to come.

Earlier in 2025, Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the City of Onalaska renewed the shared commitment to protecting the City's scenic beauty, open space, and wildlife habitat through a conservation easement. Abbie Church, conservation director at the Conservancy, shared, "This agreement specifically recognizes the City Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, which prioritizes opportunities for partnerships with private organizations like us to accelerate the implementation of the objectives of that plan and cooperating to preserve open space, wildlife habitat, and nature-based recreational

opportunities. The City is a conservation leader, demonstrating the positive impact of good partnerships."

The scenic bluffland was acquired by the Conservancy through donations in 2007 and 2021. The site offers several habitat types for visitors to enjoy, including three bluff prairies with native grasses and wildflowers; oak woodlands with large, open-grown bur and white oak trees; vertical dry cliffs that shelter wildlife and cliff-dependent species; and oak and hickory forest communities that provide habitat for pollinators, migratory birds, and songbirds such as wood thrush, black-billed cuckoo, and scarlet tanager.

Vertical dry cliffs are found along the ridgelines on the upper elevations of the property and contain fissures and crevices that provide shelter to wildlife and unique habitat for cliff-loving species such as smooth cliffbrake, harebell, and amethyst shooting star. This property is available for the local community for hiking, birdwatching, and other nature-based education and recreation.

Mayor Kim Smith of Onalaska expressed appreciation for the ongoing partnership, saying, "The City of Onalaska is grateful for the partnership we have established with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. By working together with the Conservancy, we are preserving what makes this part of the world so special. Through long-term and strategic municipal planning, we have identified and prioritized creating a 'greenway' of our bluff tops not only for today, but also for future generations." She added, "The Bluffland Greenway was once only a vision, and I am very proud to see it becoming the incredible resource we envisioned."

Conservancy staff, including stewardship specialist Connor Kotte, emphasized how visibly impactful the project is to the local community: "The wooded bluffs are integral to the scenic character of the neighborhoods in and around Onalaska, including around the La Crosse Country Club. The surrounding backdrop for the residents of these neighborhoods, members of the Country Club, and visitors



*Above: The view from the top of the French Road property is breathtaking and protected forever.
Below: Mayor Kim Smith and Conservancy Board President Allan Beatty celebrate the transfer of the French Road property. (Photos by Abbie Church and Kendra Brown)*

to the City of Onalaska would not be the same without the preservation of the forested bluffslands.” The permanent conservation easement held by Mississippi Valley Conservancy ensures that no development, subdivision, or mining can ever occur on the property.

The conservation of the French Road Property supports key goals in the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan and Climate Action Plan, as well as the City of Onalaska’s Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. To date, the City has purchased 112 acres of bluffland, with an additional 82 acres donated to the City previously from the Conservancy. This additional French Road acquisition of 80 acres will bring that total to 162 acres of conserved bluffland. “This is an incredible opportunity for our region,” Smith said, “and a testament to the generosity of the

people of our community.”

This successful project underscores the power of partnerships in conservation, particularly in Wisconsin’s Driftless Area, where natural landscapes are not only ecologically significant but deeply valued by the communities who call them home.



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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved more than 26,700 acres of bluffs, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands in Wisconsin's Driftless Area since its founding in 1997. Over 7,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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Photo by Karen Genz Photography