

Conservancy Notes

SPRING 2020

Sacred bluffland now protected

With a Sunday morning ceremony, the Mount Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church congregation celebrated completion of a long-hoped-for land conservation easement for its 19-acre Little Bluff property high above the church in Trempealeau. By historic coincidence, the bluff was a sacred place in a religion practiced by the Mississippian Native American culture about a thousand years ago.

Mount Calvary Pastor Joan Wittrock said that the congregation's decision to protect the property is consistent with the ELCA's Creation Care initiatives. She noted that community support for conservation of the property dates back many years.

The church welcomes the public to walk the trail to the historic bluff top site.

According to Danielle Benden who, with her husband Robert "Ernie" Boszhardt, did extensive archaeological studies of the site, Little Bluff was

colonized around 1050 by more than 200 people of the Cahokia Mississippian community across the river from present-day St. Louis, who traveled 500 miles upriver in a quest for Trempealeau Mountain – then considered to be a source of sacred power.

Abbie Church, our conservation director, spoke with Sunday school students about wildlife habitat and the significance of the project. She said the land adjoins other protected lands, creating a corridor of over 1,500 acres, all dedicated to wildlife habitat.

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The Cahokia Mississippians established homes and raised crops on land now occupied by the village of Trempealeau. On the bluff top, they created ceremonial mounds that aligned to the cycles of the sun and probably the moon. Archaeologists found a temple site that held evidence of what was likely a perpetual ceremonial fire.

The team of archaeologists who've studied the site over the last decade completed interpretive programs for schools and others who visit Little Bluff. A trail that starts in the middle of the village of Trempealeau leads visitors to the top of the bluff.

Photo courtesy of Robert Boszhardt (top)

A message from Carol

You're our inspiration.

I wanted to share that we've been thinking of the challenges people are facing in our community while adjusting to being cooped up indoors and dealing with the uncertainty of the Covid-19 virus. My sincerest hope is that you and your family are healthy, adapting to this situation, and finding ways to get outdoors.

Today, more than ever, the places we love and cherish close to home bring solace and a sense of community. They serve as anchors in uncertain times, reminding us of what matters, and that they are the foundation of what makes our communities special, welcoming, and resilient for people from all walks of life.

I recently received a note saying, "I find strength walking these bluffs every day. The Conservancy has an enduring mission which will only gain more importance and appreciation on the other side of this crisis."

As a former nurse, I want to echo this point. Our social and spiritual health and well-being is central to our physical health. Our connections to each other and to the land are increasingly critical – even without the virus – but now with it, even more so. We've long known about the healing power of nature, including farms and parks, and it's times like these when that power is again crystal clear.

Your support is more important than ever as families throughout the region are counting on us. The added financial pressure on landowners from the crisis makes our assistance even more urgent, and the need for land conservation more apparent than ever.

When we get through this tumultuous period in our lives, we'll celebrate together in the woodlands, prairies, streams, and farms that make the Driftless Area such a wonderful place to be.

That's why I hope you'll stay in touch through our website, social media, phone, and email until we can see each other in person again. We need you more than ever. It's what being a community is all about.

Thanks for caring,



P.S. Our entire staff has been working from home since March 19, in compliance with the governor's *Safer at Home* order. Using technology and good old-fashioned notes and phone calls, we're keeping conservation projects moving ahead. It's not easy. But it's working. We keep going because we know that you, too, care about the health and well-being of your neighbors and the land. You are our inspiration.



The scarlet tanager is a shy woodland bird that inhabits woodlands in the Trempealeau area.

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"Our diverse bird populations have been hit hard by habitat loss and fragmentation, and the best way to reverse this trend is by protecting diverse habitat corridors, such as this one," Church said.

Protection of the land was made

possible with your support and with funding from the Paul E. Stry Foundation for the easement transaction costs.

More details on all the land protection stories in this newsletter can be found in the *Newsroom* on our website.



 **21,056**
acres protected since 1997

Monroe County landowner and YOU made it happen!

With the protection of 88 acres of land in Monroe County, Wisc., this month, you've protected more than 21,000 acres for native habitat, farmland, and scenic landscapes in our nine-county service territory!

The land is owned by Diane and Charles Canniff six miles northwest of Sparta. With their voluntary conservation agreement, your Conservancy has now protected a total of 21,056 acres.

Diane Canniff acquired the property more than 50 years ago. "I started thinking about protection of the land even before MVC was founded," said Diane.

The land features undeveloped wooded bluffland, prairie, hundreds of seeps and springs, and a tributary to Big Creek, a class I trout stream.

The property supports a diverse range of plant and animal species including the three-birds orchid and butternut trees, both state-listed "species of special concern."

"Diane's land is really a hidden gem," said Zac Millbrand, stewardship coordinator for the Conservancy. "The amount of diversity on her property is impressive."

"When we established the nonprofit conservancy in 1997, we had no idea how much land we'd be able to protect," said Maureen Kinney, a founding board member who has recently rejoined the board to volunteer more of her time and expertise. "It's a major decision for a landowner to make," she said, "so early on we adopted the mantra, 'These things take time!'"

Partners protecting birds with help from landowners and citizen scientists

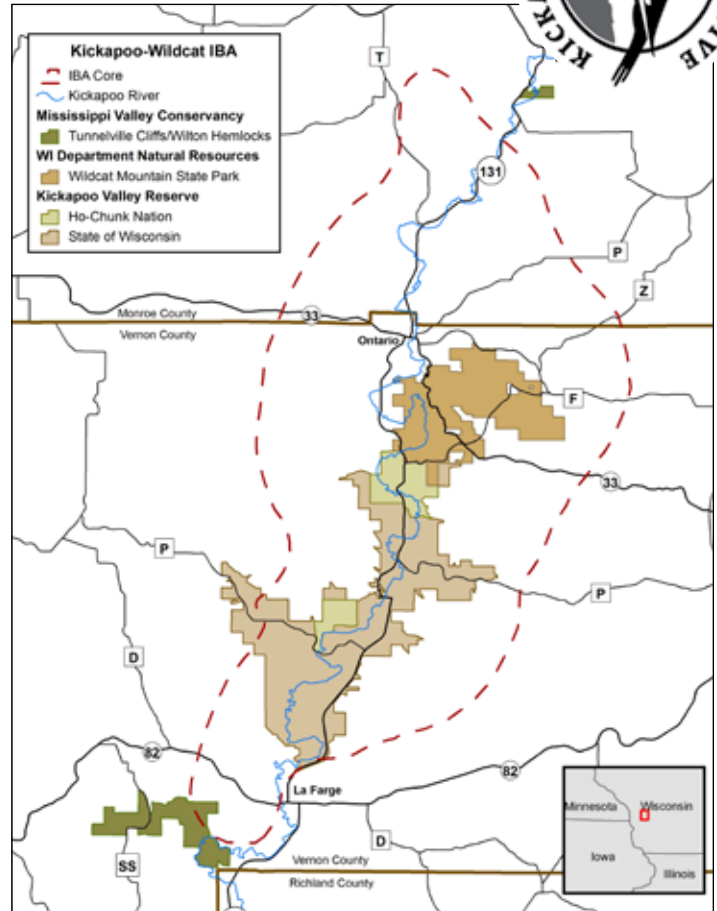


If you are a lover of nature, and especially of birds, you've probably taken notice of the changes in habitat and species that you are seeing. We've noticed, too.

We are honored to be recipients of support from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Land Trust Small Grants Program to work with project partners Valley Stewardship Network, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, and the Wisconsin DNR in spearheading the Kickapoo Bird Habitat Initiative.

In 2018, a group of concerned private citizens and conservation organizations came together to discuss our shared observations of the changing landscape and biodiversity, and to forge a path to conservation of our unique Driftless Area. The outcome of these meetings was the creation of the Kickapoo Bird Habitat Initiative (KBHI), a conservation partnership with the shared goal of improving and stabilizing habitats and bird populations in the Kickapoo Valley Reserve – Wildcat Mountain Important Bird Area (IBA).

This season, the KBHI team hopes to meet with private landowners to conduct personalized bird and habitat surveys and provide management recommendations to work toward a healthy and sustainable landscape for the future.



Two of the Conservancy's nature preserves, Tunnelville Cliffs and Wilton Hemlocks, are within or closely tied to the Kickapoo Valley Reserve – Wildcat Mountain Important Bird Area. The Conservancy also protects many acres of private land in the Kickapoo watershed. Together, these lands provide a growing corridor of habitat for woodland and grassland birds.

Do you have experience surveying birds by ear?

The KBHI team is looking for volunteer bird surveyors for the upcoming breeding season! Contact Krysten (Krysten@mississippivalleyconservancy.org) for more information.

We offer special thanks for sustaining support.

Thanks to member support, your Conservancy is able to carry on the work of helping landowners and communities protect the most valuable treasures of the Driftless Area – the cool green forests, cold streams, buzzing prairies, and local farms that we all depend upon.

Sustaining members save time, paper, and postage so we can do even more to protect land, water, wildlife, and climate. And their scheduled contributions help to ensure smooth operation of our community-supported organization. Automatic withdrawals for their sustaining contributions also save us the expense of credit card fees.

Many thanks to all of our *sustaining members*!



Pasqueflower photo courtesy of William Peterson

Wildlife corridor protected from frac sand mining

Peg Brenneke, a Monroe County native, resisted selling her grandfather's farm to a sand mine company when everyone around her succumbed to the pressure. Now, with your support, the Conservancy and Peg have ensured that the 111 acres will remain unscathed.

If she had sold, land that her grandfather dedicated his life to could have been lost to mineral extraction. "I'm doing this in memory of my grandparents," she said.

When Peg's grandparents, Bertha and Tony Scholze, purchased the property in 1942, the land bore scars from previous owners' farming practices, with deeply eroded gullies and ravines. By establishing a number of conservation practices, the family transformed the land into a sustainable farm with abundant wildlife habitat.

Today, the springs, ponds, forest, and prairie offer refuge and proximity to the natural resources habitat at Fort McCoy, which is home to a diverse population of species, including federally and state-listed endangered and threatened species. Land such as Peg's serves as an important pathway for wildlife to safely travel through.



A fence and a couple dozen feet of grass are all that separate the lifeless sand mine landscape (above) from the Brenneke land, which now connects with a corridor of wildlife habitat. Peg can now rest assured that the family farm will remain intact for future generations no matter how much the price of frac sand rises.

Peg Brenneke and Abbie Church view one of the farm fields surrounded by woodland (below).



Please join us in thanking these Conservation Partners and Supporters.

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Timing is key in helping native species

*A spring update from
Land Manager Levi Plath*



Prescribed burns have helped native prairie and oak savanna habitats thrive at Tunnelville Cliffs (top) and many other nature preserves.

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

Here is a brief summary of our top habitat restoration priorities for this spring and summer:

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

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

Devil's Backbone: Garlic mustard control in spring

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

Volunteer for the wild!



Anyone can help protect land, water, and climate by volunteering with the Conservancy. We have indoor projects and outdoor projects that include habitat restoration, special events assistance, mailings, graphic design, photography and more. And volunteering is a great way to meet more people like you!

By signing up on our website, you can indicate your interests so we can reach out to you when we have volunteer opportunities that match your interests. There's no obligation – it simply lets us know what you might be interested in doing and helps prevent us from sending too many emails.

www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer

Angel Bluff gets a guardian angel

When Tim Wucherer signed up to be site steward for Angel Bluff, one of the 22 nature preserves owned by the Conservancy, he knew exactly what he was getting into. He had already helped out on several volunteer habitat restoration work days there, and he liked the idea of incorporating the site into his life of conservation beyond his job.

"It's better than being in my backyard," said Tim, who lives in nearby Alma.

From his upbringing, education, and career in conservation, Tim brings immense knowledge and experience to his new role as a volunteer site steward for the Conservancy. He also looks forward to using Angel Bluff as an outdoor classroom for his community's schools and as a demonstration site where he can share habitat restoration practices with area landowners.

"Site steward" is a new position for which the Conservancy has recently begun to recruit knowledgeable volunteers. With over 3,500 acres of wild land to manage, help is needed in the management and restoration of wildlife habitat. "Site stewards bring eyes and ears to the properties on a consistent basis that staff alone does not have capacity to achieve. Tim brings personal and professional passion and expertise to restoring the landscape of Angel Bluff," said Conservancy land manager Levi Plath.

For information about becoming a site steward, visit www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/get-involved.



Tim Wucherer is the new volunteer site steward for Mississippi Valley Conservancy at Angel Bluff in Buffalo County. Growing up, Tim, who was born and raised in Holmen, spent a great deal of time outdoors with his parents and grandparents who were passionate about conservation. In his high school years Tim helped his grandparents manage a wild trout hatchery in northern Wisconsin. Today, he holds the position of Resource Conservation Management Specialist with the Buffalo County Land Conservation Department. He recently joined the board of directors of Mississippi Valley Conservancy. At the same time, he is working toward a masters degree in entomology through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, non-profit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 21,056 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, and streams in and around the Mississippi, Kickapoo, and Wisconsin Rivers since its founding in 1997. Over 5,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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Things you can do today: **Celebrate spring!**



We're all feeling cooped up in this time of trying to stay safe and healthy while also protecting others. So we've put together a list of activities in hopes of inspiring you to celebrate spring – indoors or outdoors!

The lands you've protected for public access offer firsthand opportunities to witness spring. You can learn more about visiting these places and download trail maps by visiting the "Nature Preserves" section on our website.

For a greater sense of community as you hike, we will soon be inviting you to sign up for the 2020-2021 Trail Trek Challenge. It's the free hike/walk program that features 16 of the most easily accessible properties you've helped us protect. We have delayed the date of the online kickoff. Watch for updates soon!

Learn about things you can do today at: www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org

Catbird nest, photo by Abbie Church