



Conservancy Notes
FALL 2023

She just wanted a cabin – and a prairie!

There's something about the big skies and open vistas of the West that inspire us all. It seems that Mark Grunwald and his sister, Leigh Carlson, both developed their passion for nature and wildlife while studying and exploring out West. Mark, while he was studying biology at Caltech and Leigh, while she was studying and working in land management in Wyoming and Alaska. Amazingly, their separate paths led to them owning conserved lands that are adjacent to one another in Crawford County, Wisconsin.

Today, with their spouses, Ann Grunwald and Forrest Carlson, they have each signed conservation agreements protecting a total of 109 contiguous acres. The restored native wildlife habitats they have co-created on the land, with the help of Mother Nature, will be conserved forever through Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

In the hills just east of Ferryville along Buck Creek Road, both families have been restoring their land over the past couple of decades. The Grunwalds and Carlsons have spent countless hours restoring the dry prairie remnants, planting diverse prairies, and restoring the oak openings and woodlands on their adjoining properties. Their ridgetop land offers an explosion of flowering prairies

that are hopping with bobolinks and eastern meadowlarks in the early summer and are skirted by oak and hickory savannas and woodlands.

The land wasn't this way when Mark and Ann Grunwald acquired it twenty-five years ago. It had been grazed, enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and row-cropped prior to their purchase. Ann just wanted a cabin – a place to get away for occasional respite from their busy medical practice in Prairie du Chien. She got the cabin, built from CCC-planted pines harvested from Wyalusing State Park. But with it came land that had a thick understory of honeysuckle, prickly ash, and multiflora rose, among other invasive and woody understory plants.

Above: Ann Grunwald inspecting one of the many bluebird houses placed along the edges of the prairies. This one had hatchlings in it.

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A message from Carol

Sunflowers and sleeping bees

The sun is just peeking up over the ridgetop. The dew on the grass sparkles and twinkles as Daisy and Duke race around sniffing for the bunnies that were raiding the garden under the cloak of the darkness during the night.

I love being out in the early morning hours. Once my chores are done I turn to the garden. I like to get a few vegetables picked in the cool of the morning. This morning, as I round the row of sweet corn, I come upon the sunflowers. I love so many things about sunflowers, and they grow all over the farm. I don't plant them – I leave that up to the birds, squirrels, and the sunflowers themselves.

This morning, as I feel the warmth of the sun on my shoulders and watch how the flowers seem to reach for it, I notice several sleeping bees. They find the soft downy pollen of the sunflower to be the perfect cozy bed to spend the night in.

Sunflowers remind me of you, because they symbolize constancy and loyalty. Mississippi Valley Conservancy's success is possible because we have loyal supporters throughout the year. Loyal volunteers who show up to pull, cut, fold, stuff, file, lead, and help in many ways. Landowners caring for the land that will someday pass to the next caretaker. Unwavering supporters who provide us with a stellar professional staff and the tools needed to continue the work.

And sunflowers symbolize resilience, endurance, and hope. Helen Keller once stated, "Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow. It's what sunflowers do."

Now, in the shadow of climate change, things can feel hopeless. They are not.

Natural climate solutions – permanently protecting land and natural communities from development – can slow climate change by as much as 25 percent if we act quickly. You are the sunflower Mississippi Valley Conservancy needs. With you by our side, together we will endure.

Thank you for your constancy and loyalty. You give me hope.

Together in conservation,

Carol

Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director





Above: Leigh Carlson's nursery of native prairie plant species provides her with seeds to plant in newly restored areas of the property.

Mark and Ann set out to learn as much as they could about land restoration. Soon after acquiring the land in 1998, Mark and his sons got to work removing cedars and clearing invasive multiflora rose and honeysuckle. Mark and Ann hired Driftless Land Stewardship to create a land management plan, which gave them a vision of what the land looked like in early settlement days.

In 2005, they received a Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) cost-share grant from USDA to do additional brush clearing, install fire breaks, do prescribed burning, and control noxious invasive plants. While the grant funds were only a small fraction of the total cost of restoring the land, Mark said the encouragement and advice they received from Rick Lange and Carol Fritsche, their USDA agents, were invaluable. As their learning journey continued, they found out about the benefits of a conservation easement – a voluntary legal agreement that now protects the fruits of their labor from future development.

A family team with a shared vision

Years later, when Leigh and her husband Forrest expressed an interest in moving to Wisconsin, Mark and Ann offered to sell part of their Crawford County land to them. In 2008, Leigh and Forrest purchased thirty-seven acres from Mark and Ann and built a house on the ridge for their permanent residence. Now a bigger team, the two couples undertook more restoration work together. As veterans of Alaska's DNR, Leigh and Forrest were no strangers to the challenges

of land restoration. Mark credits Leigh for much of the work that's been done to clear the understory and restore the oak savannas.

The Carlsons and Grunwalds have done an immense amount of work to manage a diverse array of habitats. From the remnant dry prairies to the restored prairie plantings, the plant diversity on their properties is very high.

Deep roots add resilience

The deep-rooted prairie plants that both couples have established on the former row-crop fields are ideal for slowing rainwater, minimizing erosion, storing carbon, and feeding the pollinators and birds. It's a very resilient habitat that can better tolerate weather extremes. That's why it's green in this drought year when many homes are surrounded by brown lawns.

These natural communities also provide habitat for some rare species, such as the federally threatened rusty-patched bumble bee and the state threatened slender bushclover found in their remnant prairie. The property is also a haven for grassland and savanna birds, including bobolinks, meadowlarks, red-headed woodpeckers, brown thrashers, and field sparrows. Even more impressive are the oak openings and woodlands that have been restored by their joint efforts – these rare habitats are now permanently conserved for the wildlife and for future generations.

You've added to a growing corridor of conserved land in Crawford County!

Conserving the Grunwald and Carlson properties supports the Conservancy's climate action plan by adding to a growing corridor of protected land in the surrounding watershed. Five additional conserved private properties are in the watershed, along with one of the Conservancy's public-access nature preserves, Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area. The native birds, insects, fish, and wildlife will continue to find the refuge they've depended upon for thousands of years in this river bluff landscape.

This could not have happened without your support. Thank you!



Pioneering at Plum Creek Conservation Area

by *Dave Skoloda*

Forests in the Plum Creek Conservation Area provide breeding habitat for eastern wood-pewees, Acadian flycatchers, willow flycatchers, wood thrushes, blue-winged warblers, cerulean warblers, ovenbirds, worm-eating warblers, mourning warblers, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and field sparrows, among others.

Photo by Samuel Li

Pioneers in climate adaptation – that’s how Amy Staffen described the team assembled by Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) to develop a management strategy for the 1,600-acre Plum Creek Conservation Area it acquired last year.

Staffen is the chair of the Plants and Natural Communities Working Group – a part of the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts or WICCI. She worked with the 16-member team at a two-day workshop in July where she stressed the importance of working through the Adaptation Workbook created by the Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science. The team includes MVC staff and representatives of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Wisconsin Wetlands Association and the Savanna Institute.

A DNR conservation biologist, Staffen believes the “pioneers” must approach their task with their “eyes wide open” to all the complexities of preparing the land to cope with the changing climate. Completing the workbook is what will help them be successful, she noted.

Michael Reitz, MVC’s restoration ecologist, is tasked with leading the management planning for this cattle farm and forest property, which has nearly five miles of frontage along the Kickapoo River and Plum Creek. He has produced a 23-page, 7,000-word summary of the workshop packed with the land issues and climate vulnerabilities and questions that must be answered – issues including the need for immediate action on erosion control, the role that agriculture will play in the management plan, and the issues surrounding biodiversity enhancement in the changing climate.

Planning for the challenges ahead

The planning team prioritized the need for management that expands and enhances existing rare bird habitat and reduces habitat fragmentation on the land which is at the heart of an Important Bird Area. Questions that remain to be addressed in the management plan include

- How will the changing climate make invasive plant species such more aggressive?
- Should the floodplain around Plum Creek be restructured to allow it to flood into its bottomland?
- How will management of the Plum Creek Conservation Area complement that of the neighboring Kickapoo Wildlife Area and the Kickapoo Wild Woods State Natural Area?
- What practices will make the landscape more resilient to more intense rainfall and infestations of disease and invasive species that are expected as part of the changing climate?

Conservation innovation made possible by you. Thank you!

There is a natural tendency to look at land management and do what has been done in the past, since that is what we are comfortable with. The Plum Creek Conservation Area provides an opportunity to explore options to do better conservation by working with the agricultural community and demonstrating what can be done for the native ecosystems that took thousands of years to form. Your support makes this possible.

- How can livestock be incorporated as a management tool to increase native biodiversity?

One of the early actions in the restoration plan will be to transition row crops toward permanent plant cover, affecting some 281 acres of mostly ridgetop fields that are now rented to a neighboring farmer. Applications for conservation incentive programs and grants are currently being explored to secure funds for this project, which will slow rainwater runoff and help to prevent erosion.

MVC Executive Director Carol Abrahamzon noted that Plum Creek “is a many-decades-long project,” and added, “These things take time.” She cited the importance of the expertise provided by the “great partners” in this project, and said that taking a thoughtful, deliberate approach requires being given the time to consider all the options. As Amy Staffen emphasized throughout the climate workshop, “Habitat management planning is an iterative process!”



Bird photos by Bruce Bartel

Among the thousands of migrating landbirds that use the Lower Kickapoo Important Bird Area in spring and fall are A) the mourning warbler, B) the field sparrow, and C) the ovenbird.

Ways to give . . . for them.

Them includes the natural communities that depend on undeveloped land and clean, cold water to thrive in our shared ecosystem. *And them* includes the next generation of people, who also need forests, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands to nourish their bodies, lift their spirits, and love the natural world.

Donate stock

If you have stock that has increased in value, you can help lower your taxes by donating shares to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. You may be able to take an income tax deduction and you won't have to pay capital gains tax.

Our brokerage account is with Vanguard. Here are the details you'll need:

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If you are 70½ or older, you can donate to Mississippi Valley Conservancy directly from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA) without it being considered a taxable withdrawal. And if you are over 72, the gift can count toward your required minimum distribution.

Information to complete your donation:

Our legal name: Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Inc.

Our mailing address: 1309 Norplex Drive, Suite 9,
La Crosse, WI 54601

Our federal tax ID number: 39-1871201

Photo by William Petersen



Get the lead out!

Let's protect ourselves and wildlife

by John Wetzel

We all know that lead is a danger to every living thing. Humans are still battling the problem of lead water pipes that were installed in the late 1800s to mid-1900s. Some lead pipes remain in use within our public water supply. We are getting on top of this problem, but more work needs to be done to eliminate lead water pipes.

Other sources of lead affect wildlife. These include lead sinkers that fishers use and lead shot and bullets that hunters and trapshooters use.

Fishing lines frequently break, and sinkers can become detached. They then sink to the bottom, where they can be picked up by waterfowl or other species, resulting in lead poisoning. Today, nontoxic sinkers are readily available but not used by all fishers. Hopefully this will change in the future.

A more serious problem exists when hunters and trapshooters use lead shot and bullets that are picked up by birds feeding on animal parts discarded by hunters in the field.

Birds are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning as they grind lead sinkers, and pellets and fragments found in

carcasses, in their crops. If enough finely ground lead is absorbed through the rest of the digestive tract, lead poisoning occurs.

Today, nontoxic bullets are widely available and as accurate and effective as lead bullets. Hopefully with education and a better understanding of the lead poisoning problem in eagles and other birds, more hunters will switch to nontoxic bullets.

We are making progress in addressing the problem of lead in the environment, whether lead water pipes, lead pellets in wetlands, or lead bullet fragments in gut piles. We still have work to do on all these fronts and hopefully will see a lot of progress to *Get The Lead Out!*

For more about the issues of hunting and fishing with lead, read the unabridged version of this article in our website's Wild Reads section at mississippivalleyconservancy.org/wild-reads

Above: Women are the fastest growing demographic among hunters, whose ranks are shrinking nationwide and in Wisconsin. The sisters in this photo are part of a Learn to Hunt Squirrel Class through the WI DNR. Shot size and type are one of the topics covered in these classes. These hunters have chosen to use steel shot.

Celebrating the seal of excellence

Thanks to you, our national accreditation is renewed!



One thing that unites us as a nation is land: Americans strongly support saving the natural spaces they love. Since 1997, Mississippi Valley Conservancy has been doing just that for the people of southwest Wisconsin. We are proud to share that our land trust accreditation has been renewed – proving once again that, as part of a network of over 450 accredited land trusts across the nation, it is committed to conservation excellence.

We are a stronger organization than ever for having gone through the rigorous accreditation renewal process. And your support makes it possible. Thank you!

Our strength means special places – such as the La Crosse Blufflands, Sugar Creek Bluff, New Amsterdam Grasslands and Tunnelville Cliffs – will be protected forever, making Wisconsin's Driftless Area an even greater place for now and in the future.

We provided extensive documentation of our work and were subject to a comprehensive third-party evaluation prior to achieving this distinction.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission awarded renewed accreditation, signifying its confidence that your Conservancy's lands will be protected forever. Accredited land trusts now steward over 20 million acres – the size of Denali, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Glacier, Everglades, and Yosemite National Parks combined!

The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction that stands for excellence, trust, and permanence. Mississippi Valley Conservancy is part of a network of over 450 accredited land trusts that are united by their strong ethical practices. Accredited land trusts inspire confidence and respect among their peers and in their communities. We are one of 1,281 land trusts across the United States according to the Land Trust Alliance's most recent National Land Trust Census. A complete list of accredited land trusts and more information about the process and benefits can be found at www.landtrustaccreditation.org.



Photo by Drake Hokanson

From left to right: Shane Drey, Chris Kirkpatrick, Nancy Larson, Abbie Church, Michael Reitz, Carol Abrahamzon, Sarah Bratnober, Genesis Gordon, Levi Plath, Connor Kotte

Beavers are builders

Our allies against climate change

by Frank Dravis

American beaver near La Crosse River by Amy Vach, 2023.

No other species in the Driftless region of Wisconsin is such a prolific, industrious, and large-scale builder as the beaver. They are, of course, famous for their dams and lodges. Discussion concerning beavers, especially in northern farming states abundant with flowing rivers and streams, will eventually turn to the question: are beavers beneficial?

At forty to fifty pounds on average, a beaver can do a lot of chewing, and it is an example of the majesty of nature that the beaver uses felled trees and saplings for both home construction and habitat management. It builds its lodges in a pond or close to a bank with the entrance, ingeniously, underwater.

Climate change, and with it the increasing occurrence of intense and heavy rains, is changing how the beaver is viewed. In the past, the effects of beaver dams were seen as either good or bad, yes/no. If you were hiking through the La Crosse River marsh, sighting a beaver lodge and dam added positively to the wildlife experience. But if you were the farmer who found his lower forty flooded you weren't so enthusiastic.

With climate change, however, beaver management policies are evolving. In the Western states a critical eye has turned to how the dams can increase water storage, groundwater restoration, and ecosystem survival during drought. In Wisconsin, while we can have acute periods of drought, we certainly have flooding, sustained erosion, and sudden washes. Beaver dams act like speed bumps in the streams and help to slow the water as it moves through the system. Slower water means less erosion and in some cases less flooding from storms. Ponds will absorb water to their capacity, so the volume of water flowing through a beaver system decreases. Counter to some beliefs, studies have shown that water temperatures downstream from ponds were almost 5 degrees

lower than upstream. The pond recharges groundwater, which resurfaces colder downstream. This is important for survival of species, such as trout, when a warming climate pushes habitats farther north.

Another hydrological benefit of beaver dams, and the resultant ponds, is that they filter out sediment and pollutants and store nutrients. Water flowing from a beaver dam is therefore cleaner than upstream. If the dam is left in place long enough, sediment will gradually accumulate, creating a marshy area that accelerates carbon sequestration. Of course, to sustain an environment where these practices are possible, you need land conservation. Filling in wetlands and channeling rivers eliminates the possibility of beaver benefits.

Given that the effects of climate change are increasing, landowners need to consider a wider range of implications the next time they discover a beaver irrigation project near their cornfield. Yes, you can call the DNR, remove the dam, and livetrapped the animal, but stop and think about the last gully-washer that blocked the culverts, took out the fencing, and stranded the cows. There are examples of ranchers who no longer excavate the dams to dry out fields, but leave them to retain water. In the UK they even import beavers to promote the process.

We should no longer look at beaver dams through the binary lens of "That's incredible!" or "Look at what those rodents did now!" Instead, consider that a small flood control project was built for free and will be repaired for free. No DNR or Army Corps of Engineers needed.

THANKS TO YOU, Mississippi Valley Conservancy has protected a number of sites where beavers will continue to bring their skills to waterways and wetlands, slowing floodwaters and helping keep water cold and clean.

Letting the cattle do the work

Climate-friendly ranching in Vernon County *by Kelly Sultzbach*

As a visitor to Rod Ofte's 400-plus acres of Willow Creek Ranch, it is easy to idealize what greets the eye: a simple agrarian life where humans, land, and animals exist in harmony. Clear water burbles from natural springs into the cattle trough (no piping needed) and can be cupped in your hand for a delicious taste that no bottled promise can ever match. In the upper pasture bales of hay, grown in morning dew and fertilized by the rotationally grazed herd's own manure, dry in the sun for winter feedstock, smelling of grass and wildflowers. Closer to the barn, hogs have mud puddles to lie in, roaming turkeys keep bugs in check, and cows of varying colors and breeds will come over from the shade for treats made of molasses, garlic-sea salt, and kelp. Ofte's cattle live their entire lives on pasture (or sweet hay in winter) before they are taken to the local plant for processing and distribution to area retailers and CSAs. The only machine on these fields is his little ATV, bouncing across the pasture as he points out a red-tailed hawk. *continued on page 10*

Rod Ofte calculates the gains accrued for the environment on his ranch. His zero-carbon achievement has been scientifically certified by a professor of grassland ecology at UW Madison, who calculated that Ofte's grazing operation removes 291 metric tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere per year – the equivalent of removing 63 average passenger vehicles from the road per year.



Thanks to a wood-burner that heats water in the winter and a cooperative solar installation on his barn (above), Ofte's renewable energy solutions save him at least \$500 a year on electricity.

But as Rod Ofte is quick to tell visitors, while he enjoys the rural work of this beautiful balance, maintaining it is never “simple.” Indeed, the success of Willow Creek Ranch – financially, ecologically, and as a humane producer of what he calls “carbon-neutral proteins” – depends on complex negotiations in changing times. Ofte, who has an MBA, eschews “chasing economies of scale,” knowing that more acreage and expensive motorized equipment don’t always add up to bigger profit yields. Instead, he tells me, whether you want to be a savvy salesperson or a productive rancher, you must embrace the role of “listener” and “problem-solver.”

Flex-fencing is a key tool among Ofte’s problem-solving techniques. Rather than using permanent grids of wooden planks or barbed wire, Ofte’s boundaries can shift in location and size. A roll of wire for a tensile hot fence hangs from a post, ready to be connected to any number of other posts to form different grazing areas to rotate cattle between. The sizes of these flex wire areas can be adjusted depending on the wet or dry fluctuations of seasonal change and later opened up when it is time to let the meadows grow high again.

Becoming carbon-neutral is another example of Ofte’s problem-solving, both for his own energy costs and protection of the planet. Because the cows do all the work of fertilizing and harvesting their perennial supply of feed-grass, there is no need for the tillers, planters, pesticides, combines, and driers that are required to feed grain-fed beef cattle. Without all those fossil-fuel-intensive tools, his cattle are enhancing the health of his land and minimizing the ranch’s greenhouse gas emissions. In turn, carbon is sequestered by the deep-rooted grasses and the green buffer zones along the nearby trout stream. Just as he tracks his finances, Ofte calculates the gains accrued for the environment. His zero-carbon achievement has been scientifically certified by a professor of grassland ecology at UW Madison who calculated that Rod’s grazing operation removes 291 metric tons of carbon dioxide from the

atmosphere per year – the equivalent of removing 63 average passenger vehicles from the road per year.

Of course, this doesn’t mean Ofte has stopped learning. He practices those “listener” skills too. As a regular attendee at Marbleseed’s (formerly known as MOSES) Annual Agriculture Farming Conference and the Grass Works Grazing Conference, he not only shares what he has learned but also picks up new ideas, such as the solar-powered free-range collars coordinated with GPS systems that he hopes to try out on his cattle next year.

Rod and his wife, Deb, have hosted school outings at the Willow Creek Ranch, where kids learn about where their food comes from, get to try trout fishing, and explore the woods with a DNR expert. In the give and take of sharing and learning, Ofte avoids saying “you’re wrong” by asking “why?” instead. He also makes sure to donate some of his all-natural, well-aged beef patties at local events. It may not be simple, but Ofte has created a complex pastoral that balances ecosystem health, animal health, human health, and profitability.

YOU played a role in helping Rod Ofte problem-solve for the future of his land. As he worked to transform a former tobacco farm into a grazing operation, he would call the Conservancy’s Abbie Church with questions; she proved to be a trusted fellow listener and problem-solver. When he realized his daughters might not choose to be ranchers themselves, Ofte worked with us to protect his land through a conservation easement that ensures it will never be developed and will remain a part of the Driftless Area’s agricultural landscape. Your support makes it possible for us to help landowners protect their land. THANK YOU!

To learn more about Willow Creek’s environmental practices, visit Ofte’s website willowcreekfoods.com.



*In memory of a conservation leader,
trusted advisor, and dedicated friend*

Don Frank ~ January 5, 1931-July 11, 2023

Don Frank, who died in July, is remembered by Mississippi Valley Conservancy colleagues for helping the Conservancy make the best use of its financial resources – resources Don and his wife, Barbara, enriched as major donors since the Conservancy was organized in 1997.

Barbara, who survives him, was on the Conservancy’s first board of directors, and the two of them lent to the newly organized land trust the status of their leadership in other community organizations including the Hixon Forest Nature Center, the Gundersen Medical Foundation, the Community Theater, and the Sierra Club. Don served on the Conservancy board and, for 20 years, was volunteer director of the AARP Tax-Aide program, assisting seniors and low-income persons. In 2023, he and Barbara were honored by the La Crosse Community Foundation as Philanthropists of the Year.

Pat Caffrey, who worked with Don on various committees in years past, said, “I think Don’s knowledge of business and accounting and willingness to spend the time to go over the details helped MVC to effectively track financial status and report understandable information to the board.” He added, “I know his influence has made me pay much closer attention to the accounting details ever since.”

Barb and Don opened their home for holiday gatherings and maintained long-lasting friendships in the Conservancy family. Their experience from many trips in the Boundary Waters was a benefit to those of us who paddled with them. We will remember coming to a rocky shore after a portage where Don, 79 at the time, danced rock-to-rock with a canoe on his shoulders to get to the put-in. Agile, too, he was in his support for the organization for which he cared so much.



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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 25,000 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands in Wisconsin's Driftless Area since its founding in 1997. Nearly 7,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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Save the driftless



Save the date to *Save the Driftless!* Friday, November 10

We're cooking up another great Fall Fundraiser for you to enjoy with your nature-loving friends and Mississippi Valley Conservancy! Spin the wheel of wine, bid on treasures and experiences, and celebrate the land, water, and wildlife of the Driftless! Watch for your invitation in the mail or buy tickets on our website today!

These beauties depend on us to *save the driftless . . . for them.*

Photos by Allen B. Sheldon, William Petersen, and Abbie Church