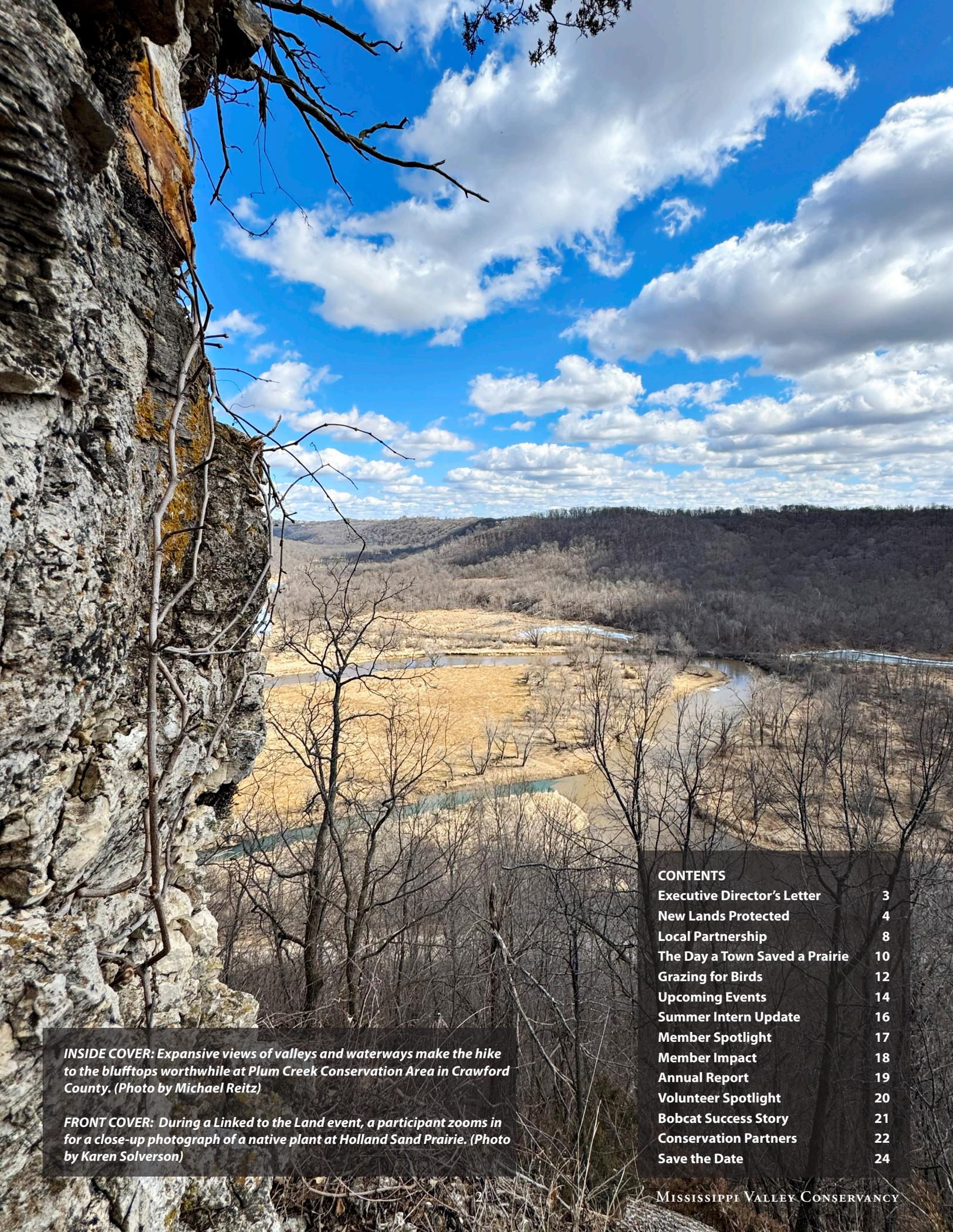


Mississippi Valley
CONSERVANCY



**Conservation
Close to Home**

2025 Annual Report



INSIDE COVER: *Expansive views of valleys and waterways make the hike to the bluffs worthwhile at Plum Creek Conservation Area in Crawford County. (Photo by Michael Reitz)*

FRONT COVER: *During a Linked to the Land event, a participant zooms in for a close-up photograph of a native plant at Holland Sand Prairie. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*

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Conservation close to home

This past year, I pushed my Adventure Racing hobby to new levels—competing in five states across the Midwest. Each race gave me a front-row seat to the incredible diversity of our region’s landscapes. One race took place right here in the Driftless Area, where my team pedaled up steep bluff roads, trekked through quiet valleys hiding their own secret beauty, and paddled across the mighty Mississippi.

**A message from
Carol Abrahamzon,
Executive Director**

Out there, moving through those familiar hills and waters, I was reminded of something essential: the places that ground us, challenge us, and inspire us don’t stay wild and vibrant by accident. They stay that way because people like you care enough to protect them. Conservation close to home happens because you care.

This past year, we saw that care in action. Families protected farmland because they want to pass on more than acres—they want to pass on a way of life. Volunteers returned again and again to clear trails and burn prairies because those lands shaped their earliest memories. Families shared stories about wanting their children and grandchildren to grow up with the same open fields, quiet forests, and clean waters they’ve always cherished.

One of the clearest signs of success this year wasn’t just the acres protected—it was the people involved. Teachers, farmers, young families, grandparents, business owners, partners, and students all stepped forward. Conservation became a shared community effort made possible by your generosity and your belief in the importance of place.

When we talk about “conservation close to home,” we’re talking about connection—to the land, to each other, and to the future we’re building together. These places hold our stories. They nourish us. And, because of you, they will continue to sustain the generations that follow.

Thank you for being the heart of this work. Thank you for investing in the landscapes that define our community. And thank you for ensuring that conservation close to home remains a legacy we can all share.

Together in conservation,

Carol Abrahamzon



The Jensens' journey: Steep slopes and steady stewardship

Story by Drake Hokanson

It's easy to imagine that all conservation-minded landowners come fully equipped with encyclopedic knowledge about how to protect and improve their land—and about everything that lives there, right down to the name of every warbler that crosses the property each spring. But Beth and Niels Jensen of Gays Mills are an example of something perhaps more typical: the steep learning curve that comes with understanding a piece of land and what

it needs for preservation and renewal.

When they bought their 39-acre hillside farm in 2014, they knew they had a lot to learn. Fortunately, both came with agricultural backgrounds. Beth spent weekends on her grandparents' farm in Illinois; Niels grew up and worked on his family's farm in his native Denmark and on farms in the States. "We didn't know much about land," said Beth. "I had hunted mushrooms

and collected gooseberries."

The Jensen land is steep and diverse, unfolding in distinct layers from bottom to top. "We knew it wasn't good farmland," Niels said. Their house and barn sit low near Wisconsin Highway 171, while the slopes above hold hay fields now grazed by the family's horses. Higher up, oak woodlands and savanna stretch across the hillside, with bur, white, red, and black oaks creating a varied canopy. At the very top lies a dry prairie, capping a



Photo by Drake Hokanson

380-foot rise in elevation. A small stream winds through the corner of the property and drains into the Kickapoo River just 200 feet downstream.

From the beginning, Beth and Niels dove into the ongoing work of clearing invasive species like honeysuckle and Japanese barberry—an effort familiar to many conservation-minded landowners across the region. “We got involved with Mississippi Valley Conservancy right away,” said Beth. Conservancy staff offered guidance on land management and shared information about conservation easements that could permanently protect their property. Soon, the Jensens connected with other organizations and neighbors, building a network of knowledge and encouragement. “We’ve met a lot of people who are like-minded,” said Niels.

Today, their circle of support includes the Conservancy, Valley Stewardship Network, Crawford Stewardship Project, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, The Prairie Enthusiasts, and the Wisconsin DNR. Through meetings, site visits, partnerships, and countless conversations, the Jensens have grown into their role as land stewards. They’re not just learning *about* the land—they’re learning *from* it.

At first, they lived in the old farmhouse while building a barn, installing fencing, and adding a watering system for their horses.

In 2020, they bought a house in nearby Gays Mills, moved it to their property, and renovated and expanded it into their current home. Three years ago, they tore down the original farmhouse. And this summer, Beth and Niels took another important step in their conservation journey: they signed a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy to ensure that their beloved hills, woods, and prairies will be protected in perpetuity.

“The Jensens have an exceptionally scenic property,” said Chris Kirkpatrick, conservation manager for the Conservancy. “The entire property is in perennial cover, which makes it more resilient to extreme weather conditions, including the droughts and heavy rain events that have become more common in recent decades.” Their conservation efforts extend beyond their own boundaries. Perennial cover helps slow runoff and reduce flash flooding—a frequent issue in the Kickapoo watershed. Their stewardship also aligns with the comprehensive plans of both the Village of Gays Mills and Crawford County, which aim to preserve the region’s rural character and quality of life.

This past summer, Beth and Niels sat at a table on their patio, looking uphill toward their grazing horses and the woodland and goat prairie beyond. “We hear the birds right away, every day,” Beth said. “I always love to see what the day brings,” added Niels with a smile.

“We have a big project up in the woods—a lot of honeysuckle. It will take the rest of our lives.” He counts on support from both nature and the Conservancy. “If you do it the right way, you want it to continue.” Because of member and donor support, the Conservancy will be there to ensure that the conservation easement will prevent future subdivision or residential development on this private property, forever. Their easement designates specific areas for agricultural uses and a building zone for their residence, reflecting thoughtful discussions the Conservancy has had with the landowners to ensure the agreement aligns with their long-term vision for the property.

The Jensens’ story reminds us that conservation doesn’t require encyclopedic knowledge—it begins with curiosity, commitment, and community. By listening to the land and learning from those who know it best, Beth and Niels have not only transformed their hillside farm but have also contributed to a more resilient future for the Kickapoo River valley. Their journey is far from over, but thanks to their conservation easement and support from members like you, the natural beauty and ecological value of their land will endure for generations to come.

Visit MississippiValleyConservancy.org to learn how to protect your land or support projects like this one.

Left: Beth and Niels Jensen enjoy a quiet moment in their woods near Gays Mills as they search for native plants.

MORE LANDS PROTECTED

Each year, we receive many requests to preserve land in the Driftless Area. Each conservation project we take on requires careful analysis of the land's natural or agricultural resources, its location relative to other protected land, and its potential to mitigate the effects of extreme weather. There is also a great deal of discussion to ensure we understand the landowner's needs and desires, and that we can reach an agreement that serves the long-term interests of both parties. As you read these pages celebrating our accomplishments this year, know that every success is rooted in this thoughtful, time-intensive process—guided by our mission and strategic plan—so each land transaction brings us closer to protecting the Driftless Area forever.



Photo by Karen Solversen

162
a c r e s

Thanks to your generosity and the support of The Nature Conservancy, Mississippi Valley Conservancy has received 162 acres along the Mississippi River in Nelson, Wisconsin—now Wandering Rock State Natural Area.

This acquisition connects a 400-acre corridor of protected land and safeguards rare habitats like bluff prairies and oak woodlands, home to species such as ovenbirds and endangered peregrine falcons.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy has already begun implementing proactive habitat management activities and welcomes new volunteers to help expand prairies, improve the woodland health and keep trails clear. This land in Buffalo County is available for public recreation for hiking, birdwatching, hunting, and enjoyment of the spectacular views of the Mississippi River valley from the top. Your donations and volunteer time will fund prescribed burns, invasive species removal, and long-term stewardship that keep these habitats healthy for wildlife and people for years to come.

86
a c r e s

For more than four decades, Jim and Rose Sime cared for Bald Bluff with a deep love for its prairies, forests, and wildlife, ensuring it would be ready for the next chapter of conservation. Their quiet dedication transformed this land into a place of beauty, biodiversity, and lasting value. Now protected as part of the Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area in Grant County, this 86-acre addition allows Mississippi Valley Conservancy to continue that tradition of stewardship with prescribed burning, invasive species control, and other habitat management in collaboration with volunteers. Visit Boscobel Bluffs SNA for hiking, birding, hunting, volunteer work parties, and other low-impact recreation.



Photo by John Sime

159 acres

In memory of Doris Michelson's lifelong dream to protect her family farm, her five children partnered with the Conservancy to place a conservation easement on their La Crosse County farm in 2025. The easement safeguards prime farmland, woodlands, and a trout stream, ensuring agricultural use and scenic beauty for future generations. This effort adds to a corridor of nearly 300 acres of protected lands, supporting local conservation goals.



Photo by Abbie Church



Photo by Chris Karppatrick

85 acres

Bill and Joanne Groves permanently protected their 85-acre family-owned property in Richland County by donating a conservation easement to the Conservancy in 2025. This action honors a family legacy and ensures the land remains intact and enjoyed by future generations. Their private land, part of a protected 1,078-acre wildlife corridor, now safeguards farmland and habitat forever.

64 acres

Alan Slavick and Shirley Northern transformed nearly 64 acres of land in Crawford County into a thriving sanctuary through decades of care—preserving the prairies, woodlands, pastures and trout streams that make this property ecologically important. In honor of Al, who passed away in 2020, Shirley permanently protected their private land with a conservation easement in 2025, ensuring that Al's legacy will live on.



Photo by Chris Karppatrick



Photo by Carol Abrahamson

127 acres

In 2025, Marilyn Adam and Ralph Tauke permanently protected 127 acres of farmland and forested bluffs near the Mississippi River through a conservation easement with the Conservancy. This highly developable Vernon County farmland is farmed organically with conservation practices that build healthy soils and protect water quality. The hayfields and woods support healthy wildlife and an abundance of native pollinators. Their commitment ensures the property remains forever undeveloped while supporting local land and water resource plans.

More Lands Protected (continued on page 9)

Restoring land, rebuilding lives: A decade of partnership with Prairie du Chien Project Crew

Story by Frank Dravis

Since 2015, the Conservancy has partnered with the Prairie du Chien Correctional Institution to bring meaningful, hands-on conservation work to the Conservancy properties through the correctional institution's Project Crew. "A crew of six to eight members can get a lot of work done in an eight-hour day," said Andrea Mumm, Project Crew sergeant. "They take pride in their work."

Staffed by inmates from the Prairie du Chien correctional facility, the persons in their care (PIOCs) form the body of the crew.

The Project Crew is a unique initiative designed to equip PIOCs with valuable job skills and solid work habits needed for successful reintegration into society. The program emphasizes rehabilitation not only through skill-building but also by fostering positive connections between participants and community organizations. "The Project Crew aims to teach skills, encourage responsibility, and prepare PIOCs for a fresh start," explains Andrea. "It's about giving people the chance to contribute to their community while building a foundation for their future."

In a typical workday, such as clearing fire breaks at Sugar Creek Bluff Natural Area, crew members

complete a variety of nature conservation tasks using chainsaws, shovels, and loppers that benefit local ecosystems while providing participants with experiences they might never have otherwise. "Working with the Prairie du Chien Corrections crew over the last 10 years has had an enormous impact on the Conservancy," Land Manager Levi Plath said. "We've been able to complete projects at our nature

preserves that would not have been possible without their help. Some crew members are new and some stay the same, but the work ethic that the crew members bring into the field and the stories and experiences that they take with them provide a path forward."



Photo by Andrea Mumm

Members of the crew regularly express gratitude for the opportunity to learn new skills and work in environments far removed from their daily routines. Many take pride that their contributions have a lasting, positive impact on the community. For some, these projects provide a rare sense of purpose and accomplishment.

The feedback from participants underscores how transformative the program can be. A number of PIOCs had never set foot on a nature preserve before working with the Conservancy, let alone

operated tools such as chainsaws. They approach these experiences with curiosity and determination, gaining confidence with each task completed. According to Andrea, even the rides back to the institution are filled with positive conversation—a testament to the program’s morale-boosting effect. “The opportunity for crew members to gain experience at organizations like the Conservancy has had a profound and transformative impact,” Andrea notes. “The knowledge and confidence they gain here will serve them well in their post-incarceration journey.”

The benefits of the program extend beyond work completed at each site. Skills learned through these placements—whether they involve land stewardship, teamwork, or equipment operation—translate into improved employability upon release. Participants also develop habits of reliability, communication, and problem-solving that are invaluable in any career.

“The success of this program is a powerful reminder that we accomplish more when we work together,” shared Carol Abrahamzon, executive director of the Conservancy. “By combining the Conservancy’s mission with the dedication of the Prairie du Chien Project Crew, we’re restoring the land and offering people a path to new opportunities. That’s conservation at its best—neighbors, partners, and communities pulling together for a brighter future.”

The partnership between the Conservancy and the Prairie du Chien Correctional Institution demonstrates the power of collaboration. Prairie restoration, invasive species control, and trail maintenance are examples of much-needed and never-ending work that these natural areas need every year.

The Conservancy gains the sought-after labor of an experienced work crew, and the members have interesting in-the-field tasks to devote themselves to completing. Each day spent in the field is more than just a work assignment—it’s an investment in their future, a step toward rebuilding their lives, and one more way to restore and rebuild ecosystems for both wildlife and people alike.

MORE LANDS PROTECTED *(continued)*



Creek at Diezel's property, photo by Abbie Church

40
a c r e s

Mary Diezel’s generous 40-acre land donation lies within the Mississippi River migratory flyway and protects scenic wooded bluffs within three major conservation priority areas of continental ecological significance. The property features imperiled southern dry and dry-mesic forests, habitat for the state-listed broad-banded forestsnail, and a spring-fed trout stream.



KVR Addition, photo by Abbie Church



Onalaska transfer, photo by Kamha Broun

97
a c r e s

Mississippi Valley Conservancy completed the transfers of three properties to public partners. On February 19, the Conservancy transferred the KVR Addition of 17 acres of Kickapoo River frontage, wetlands, and floodplain forest to be owned and managed by the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board. On August 14, two tracts comprising 80 acres, now known as the French Road Property, were transferred to the City of Onalaska as part of the Onalaska Natural Lands Protection Program. These diverse prairies and wooded bluffs are now owned and managed by the City of Onalaska. All three properties are available for nature-based public recreational activities and include permanent conservation easements held by Mississippi Valley Conservancy to ensure the wildlife habitat is protected in perpetuity.

The day a town saved a prairie

Story by Karen Solverson

In October 2000, a small group of friends gathered on the rolling ground of what is now Holland Sand Prairie State Natural Area (HSP)—bending low to collect native prairie seeds under a bright autumn sky. Among them were Mike and Kathy Giese, Craig and Mary Thompson, and Gretchen and Dave Skoloda, along with Peg Zappen, Pete Putnam and Bobbie and Pat Wilson. What brought them there that day was a shared urgency: the belief that this rare, unplowed sand prairie was about to be lost to development.

The dunes and hollows on the Holland Prairie are the only undisturbed Aeolian (wind-formed) landforms in the entire area, creating a unique ecosystem critical to the survival of many species. In the background of those photos, the brush is already creeping in, hinting at how fragile the prairie's balance had become. Ironically, this land might have been quickly developed if not for a school project. Neighbor George Varnum was helping his daughter collect plants for a science project when they realized how many uncommon plants lived on the property, and the need for its protection became clear.

A prairie enthusiast, he took a handful of glossy 4 x 6



Contributed photo

This early group of concerned citizens began collecting seeds in 2000, setting in motion a series of events that led to the eventual protection of Holland Sand Prairie SNA.

photos to the La Crosse DNR office and met with Craig Thompson. “I remember being literally blown away by photos revealing large patches of pasqueflower and prairie smoke, along with stands of rough blazing star and showy goldenrod,” Thompson recalled. The following day, Thompson called Randy Hoffman (now retired), the State Natural Areas Ecologist, and asked him to evaluate the site. “Randy’s subsequent visit confirmed that Holland

Left: Gretchen Skoloda gathers seeds at one of the first seed collection days at Holland Sand Prairie. Center: In addition to removing brush, collecting seeds, and cutting trails, the FHSP volunteers removed many truckloads of garbage from the newly protected prairie. Right: The following year in 2001, the seed collection and clean-up continued with another large group of volunteers. (Contributed photos)





Sand Prairie was an exceedingly rare, high quality sand prairie, worthy of protection,” Thompson said.

With the threat of an impending purchase, people began to take action and discussed what could be done to save the prairie from being turned into a subdivision. Around that same time, former conservation director George Howe and Craig Thompson made a pitch to the Town of Holland Board, asking for protection of the prairie. That night, in a packed town hall and buoyed by an outpouring of public support, the town board voted to raise local property taxes to help save the land.

It was a powerful moment, and a vivid reminder of how deeply nature can move us. When the future of the land was uncertain, Jim Fowler, a Conservancy board member at the time, put his own retirement savings on the line to buy the property himself, simply so it wouldn't be lost before the Conservancy could find a way to protect it. It was an act of faith, courage, and love for the land. In time, the funding came together, and the property officially became Holland Sand Prairie State Natural Area. Inspired by Jim's example, the Friends of the Holland Sand Prairie (FHSP) formed to continue caring for this

remarkable place, now protected from development forever. Pete Putnam, who has lived across the road from the prairie since 1981, became president of FHSP and led the restoration and protection efforts along with the partners in the project. “Sixty-one acres have been forever saved from the bulldozer. I am part of a ‘project’ that will live long after I die. This land has changed me... forever,” he said.

Thanks to the dedication of those early conservationists and countless supporters since, Holland Sand Prairie remains a haven for rare plants, wildlife, and the people who continue to care for it and enjoy hiking there. Twenty-five years later, more than 118 species have been identified on this property including many uncommon plants, threatened birds and birds of special concern. Ongoing burns and restoration work have kept Holland Sand Prairie a vital refuge for wildlife, even as development has spread all around it. Each year, many groups use this unique nature preserve for educational hikes and scientific research, while others enjoy the solitude of a hike in the middle of an urban area.

What began as a grassroots act of love for the land became a lasting legacy of stewardship—one that still inspires the work of Mississippi Valley Conservancy today. With the ongoing support of donors and volunteers like you, this work will continue far into the future, ensuring that wildlife will always have a home at this unique property.

Thank you, Town of Holland Board, for choosing to protect this land so long ago, and thank you to the earliest group of determined individuals, many not included in these images, who worked tirelessly to protect the prairie. Much gratitude also to the partners who have worked with Mississippi Valley Conservancy in protecting and preserving this land: WI-DNR, The Prairie Enthusiasts, and the Friends of the Holland Sand Prairie (FHSP). We truly are better together.

Volunteers are essential for managing these unique ecosystems, and opportunities are available throughout the year. Join us to volunteer at Holland Sand Prairie or other preserves by signing up online at MississippiValleyConservancy.org/volunteer.

Grazing: It's for the birds

Story by Krysten Zummo, Range Ecologist,
Audubon Upper Mississippi River

It is 4:52 am, June 5, 2025. The sky is just turning pink and orange on the horizon and the dew on the nearly waist-high grass is soaking the outer layer of my rain pants. To my left, the cattle are happily snacking in their pasture and in front of me, on a lone sapling, a male bobolink sings his heart out. His presence is due in no small part to those grazing cattle. I smile, enjoy his sunrise performance, and mark him down on my data sheet.

Grassland birds, such as the bobolink, have some of the most quickly declining populations in North America, driven by loss of grassland habitat. Historically, grasslands made up one-third of the landscape in the United States, but their lack of trees and flat or rolling terrain made them easy to convert for human uses. We have lost over 60% of our grassland acreage since 1970, making it the most threatened and least protected terrestrial ecosystem.

To understand how we got here and gain a deeper historical perspective, I turned to Jim Munsch, a Driftless

In spite of being a species of special concern, the bobolink is thriving due to changes in grazing and haying practices at the Munsch farm.



This beef herd is a part of a grazing operation that is certified by Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program. Cattle on this operation are rotated to new pastures daily to mimic bison and are not back in this pasture for 45-60 days, allowing long regrowth periods.

Area grazer who permanently protected his farm with a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 2011. Jim has been grazing cattle for more than 35 years and played a key role in developing the economic models for UW-Madison's Grassland 2.0 project, a collaborative effort to restore ecological functions on farmlands through economically viable pathways.

"Fire was a part of the pre-European prairie system, but it was not every year in every spot...prairie relied on hooved animals [bison] to cycle nutrients and disturb the soil," Jim said. As a conservation-minded grazer, Jim is dedicated to healthy soils. "Based on satellite imagery and other technologies, it has been estimated that in Vernon County alone, one-half of all of the topsoil has been eroded," Jim continued.

Today, bison no longer roam our landscape, and fire has been severely restricted, leaving our grasslands without the regular disturbance they need. In the Great Plains, the loss of grassland habitat to woody encroachment is now equivalent to acres lost to conversion to development and row crops. (Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), 2021).

With more than 90% of grasslands in the United States owned or managed privately, it is landowners who hold the key to the future of both the habitat and the birds. Many of these private lands are in a grazing system, and if managed through adaptive grazing practices, they can be part of the solution. Jim's solution? "You have to look at what nature was before man's intervention [before the steel plow]...and you try to replicate it...The big



difference between historical grazing and what we do is that now animals return to an area sooner.”

Jim has conducted multiple experiments on his farm to understand the impacts of different rest-rotation practices on the grassland birds that he sees. He knows when to expect his meadowlarks to return, that Henslow’s sparrows want more thatch, how their breeding timelines vary, and how he can provide for multiple species by shifting when and how he grazes, hays, or even rests an area. While he acknowledges that delaying grazing or haying may minimally decrease his animals’ weight gain, he also has found that letting pastures go to seed before putting out cattle has led to the pasture being reinvigorated the next year without him having to no-till additional seed.

The healthy population of bobolinks, practices for building soil organic matter, and conservation-minded approach all contributed to making this property a high priority for Mississippi Valley Conservancy to protect. “The best conservation is when landowners lead by example, demonstrating not only the benefits to birds and soil, but also to their own bottom line,” said Abbie Church, conservation director for the Conservancy, “On my first visit to the property, Jim was breaking apart cow pies to show the healthy insect community breaking it down into useable soil as the bobolinks watched from a nearby fencepost. Too often you hear about all the soil lost, whereas this farm has the records to prove the practices are effectively building the soil.”

Protecting working lands like this one means ensuring that conservation values endure well beyond today’s

ownership. Conservation easements can be thoughtfully tailored to support managed rotational grazing by requiring future landowners to submit grazing plans for areas designated for agricultural use. This approach allows Conservancy staff to confirm that grazing practices continue to strengthen soil health, protect water quality, and support biodiversity, preserving not only the productivity of the farm but the ecological benefits that made it worth protecting in the first place.

To encourage more graziers to take a bird’s-eye view, Audubon developed its Conservation Ranching certification, Audubon Certified Bird-Friendly Land. This program works alongside beef and bison graziers to build habitat management plans that incorporate the needs of the cattle and the needs of the grassland birds. The result is a mosaic of grassland habitat created by adaptive grazing that supports a wide variety of birds, from savanna sparrows to greater prairie chickens.

Landowners often ask me where their bobolinks have gone. And while the research has repeatedly shown that bobolinks require large tracts of treeless grassland, I always have to share with them my experiences on Jim’s slender ridgetop farm. It is filled with bobolinks. Jim’s pastures show what’s possible when grazing and birds thrive together—and with thoughtful management, any grassland, big or small, can become a haven for species like the bobolink.

To learn more about Audubon Conservation Ranching or explore certification opportunities in the Driftless Area, contact Krysten Zummo at krysten.zummo@audubon.org.



Make this your year to explore, learn, and volunteer with the Conservancy

Three ways to grow and give back in 2026



Through our *Linked to the Land* program, we invite community members to step outside and experience the Driftless Area in new and engaging ways. This program invites people to come together to enjoy free guided hikes and workshops on Conservancy-protected properties. Led by local experts, these activities introduce participants to the wonders of our region—from native wildlife and migratory birds to the spring wildflower blooms and the night sky. With more than 7,400 acres of public-access lands, the Conservancy offers countless opportunities for hands-on, educational outdoor experiences. **In 2025, your support helped us reach more than 2,800 people at Conservancy events!**



Another way to expand your horizons this year is to join the *Trail Trek Challenge*. The Conservancy has more than 30 nature preserves to explore, 19 of which have maintained trails to explore. Download the *Trail Trek Challenge Trail Guide* for some great tips on places to hike all year long. Hikes are rated based on difficulty, and many include family-friendly scavenger hunts as well. This free, year-long hiking program challenges you to hike 5 or more of our nature preserves to earn a water bottle sticker, but mostly we hope to inspire you to explore new lands and enjoy all that nature has to offer.



And finally, we invite you to deepen your connection with the Conservancy this year by joining our *Volunteer for the Wild* program. Whether you're removing invasive species, restoring prairies, maintaining trails, or assisting with special projects, as a volunteer you play a vital role in caring for the lands we all enjoy. **No experience is needed**—just a willingness to learn and a desire to give back. With opportunities available across the Driftless Area, *Volunteer for the Wild* offers a meaningful way to learn new skills, meet fellow conservation-minded neighbors, and see firsthand how your efforts make a difference.



These programs are grounded in a simple truth: conservation grows when people feel connected to the places they help protect. Donor and partner support ensures that these events and nature preserves remain free and open to everyone, inspiring a **culture of stewardship** that strengthens both our communities and the lands we depend on. Because of each of you, thousands of your fellow community members can explore, learn, and feel at home in nature...close to home.



Linked to the Land schedule & other upcoming events

Advance registration is required for all events, and usually opens 4 to 5 weeks before the event. Follow us on Facebook for reminders about upcoming activities, and get details and register at MississippiValleyConservancy.org/events.

Feb 21	Winter Birds of the Coulee Region	Viroqua Public Library, Vernon Co.
Mar 28	National Geographic Photographer Neil Rettig - Grassland Conservation	Annual Friends Gathering, La Crosse
Apr 26	Guided Marsh Hike/Earth Fair	The Nature Place, La Crosse Co.
May 9	World Migratory Bird Day Hike	Sugar Creek Bluff, Crawford Co.
June 11	Habitat Typing & Forest Health	Wandering Rock, Buffalo Co.
June 27	Grazing for Birds	Plum Creek Cons. Area, Crawford Co.
July 11	Bat Ecology Cave Tours	Kickapoo Caverns, Crawford Co.
July 23	Enhancing Biodiversity	Private Land, Vernon Co.
Aug 1	Bumblebee ID & Conservation	Private Land, Grant Co.
Sept 12	Science in the Stream: Mussel Survey	Private Land, Jackson Co.
Sept 12	Gardens & Gazing	FSPA, La Crosse Co.
Oct 10	Fungi in the Forest	Kaplan Tract, La Crosse Co.
Oct 10	Prairie Stargazing Hike	Tunnelville Cliffs, Vernon Co.
Nov 5	Fall Fundraiser	Radisson Hotel, La Crosse Co.



Upcoming Volunteer for the Wild dates

Mar 3	Creating Firebreaks @ La Crosse Blufflands, Kaplan
Mar 21	Garlic Mustard Removal @ Sugar Creek Bluff
Apr 18	Trash Clean-up @ La Crosse River Conservancy
Apr 28	Garlic Mustard Removal @ Plum Creek Conservation Area
May 8	Invasive Weed Control @ Eagle Eye State Natural Area

LEARN MORE
& SIGN UP



From cancellation to connection: Community creates a path forward for summer intern

Story by Drake Hokanson

This past spring, University of Vermont student Emily DiGiacomo was preparing to leave home for La Crosse, Wisconsin, and her summer-long AmeriCorps volunteer position with Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the Friends of the Blufflands when she received devastating news: her position—and the entire program—had been cancelled. AmeriCorps had been shut down by the federal government.

In La Crosse, word spread quickly through the Conservancy office as staff considered what to do. A college student had just lost the job she was counting on. Two active conservation organizations had suddenly lost a valuable team member at the start of the busiest season for fieldwork.

“Let’s go ahead and hire her,” said Carol Abrahamson, executive director of the Conservancy. “We will have to figure out where the funds will come from, but it is the right thing to do.” To help cover Emily’s lost AmeriCorps stipend, staff launched an urgent

Intern Emily DiGiacomo spent the summer learning to identify and remove invasive plants on Conservancy nature preserves after her position was made possible by supporters. (Photo by Payton Lott)

email and social media appeal asking for help. The story spread rapidly, picked up by local television and radio stations, and soon Carol found herself in front of the cameras sharing Emily’s story. And that’s when the community stepped in.

Pledges and checks began arriving almost immediately. “Everything came in fast,” Carol shared. “People wanted to take action and do something good right here in their community.” Many donors shared heartfelt notes along with their gifts:

“Being able to help with this filled my heart because it felt like the one thing I could do to make a positive change right now.”

Other notes included: “While I can’t give much, this donation is my way of protesting against this injustice.”

“Thank you for bravely standing up for this young woman and conservation.”

Because of you and others who answered the call, Emily was able to make her way to La Crosse after



all. “At first I didn’t know it was happening,” she said. “To know that people raised that money—more than enough—was heartwarming.”

The community’s generosity not only covered her summer stipend but also provided an educational award to help with her final semester of college. Thanks to your swift and caring response, the Conservancy and Friends of the Blufflands gained essential on-the-ground help just when it was needed most—especially with invasive species removal projects.

Emily quickly embraced the work and the Driftless landscape. “I had no prior impression of the Midwest,” she said. “It’s so beautiful! It changes so abruptly from savanna to prairie to pine forest.” She learned to confidently handle a chainsaw, helped remove sweet clover, garlic mustard, and buckthorn, and deepened her understanding of the region’s natural history. “I’ve learned so much—my journal is full!” she said. “This experience strengthened my connection to the land and my commitment to conservation.”

Now back in Vermont finishing her Environmental Studies degree with a focus on forestry, Emily is thinking ahead to what’s next. “I might head for Oregon after graduation,” she said, “but I really like it here. If Oregon doesn’t work out, I would come back to the Driftless!”

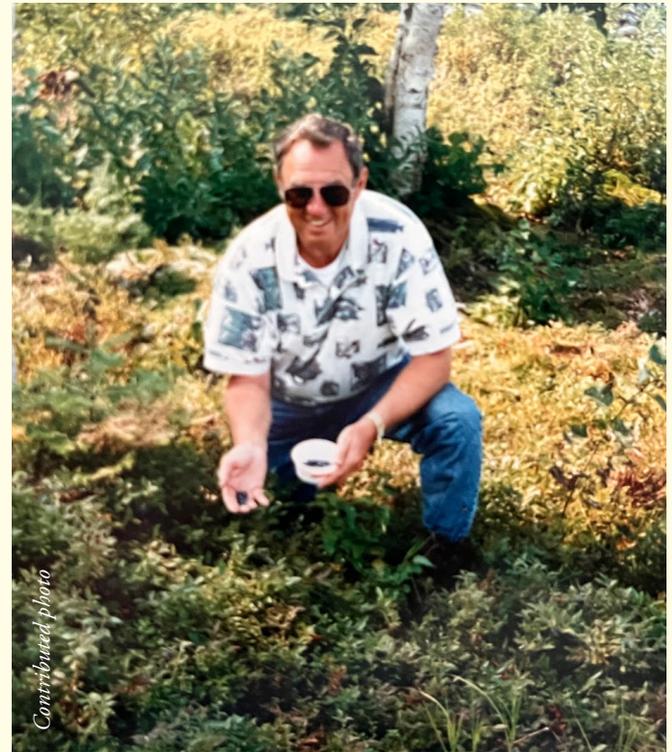
Because the community came together, a young conservationist’s path was restored, and her work left a lasting mark on the land. The prairies and bluff-lands she helped restore will continue to thrive—cleaner, stronger, and more resilient—because people like you cared enough to act.

What began as a crisis became a powerful reminder that **conservation begins with community**. When people in the Driftless step up for each other and for the land, it ripples far beyond one summer job. It protects the places we love and inspires the next generation to do the same.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

In memory of George Henry Kerckhove

July 28, 1937 - June 12, 2025



George Kerckhove’s legacy with the Mississippi Valley Conservancy is one of unwavering dedication and generosity. As president of the board of directors from 2009 to 2012, George guided the organization through some of its most challenging times with wisdom, steadiness, and care.

In 2009, he and his wife, Sharon, made a gift to future generations by permanently protecting 200 acres of their land through a conservation easement—ensuring its natural habitat would remain untouched by development.

George’s enduring commitment to stewardship, often symbolized by the well-worn binder of financials he carried with him, helped build the strong foundation on which the Conservancy stands today. We are deeply grateful for his leadership and his lasting impact on the organization and this area.

A measurable impact

Your support powered the work you see on this page. Alongside other dedicated members, sponsors, and funding partners, you helped equip a dedicated team of staff and volunteers with the resources they needed to protect local land, engage our community, and care for the places we all love. The 2025 impact you see here is the result of your belief in this mission and your commitment to making a lasting difference. Thank you for believing in the importance of conservation close to home.



3,000+ hours

Interns caring for the land locally



136 visits

With landowners and municipalities



200+ acres

Invasive brush and weed removal



5 family farms

Protected forever in 2025



249 acres

Prescribed burns to restore habitat



1,738 hours

Volunteer work on nature preserves



11 more people

Included the Conservancy in their estate plans



247 acres

Opened for public use in 2025



8 acres

Native, pollinator-friendly prairie planted



70 lbs

Native seeds collected



761 acres

Newly protected private properties



650 hours

Easement monitoring by volunteers & staff

\$130,500 in grants

To restore habitat in the Driftless Area



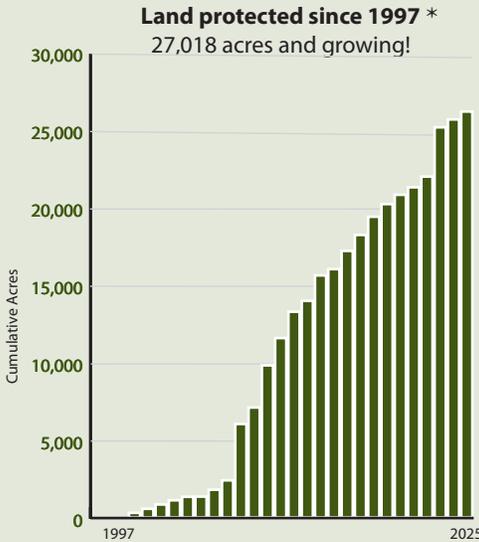
\$254,000 in grants

To assist with land acquisition for public use

2025 financial summary

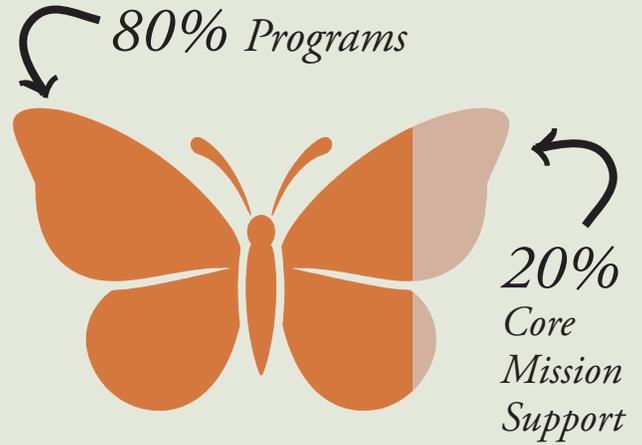
Every protected property requires an investment of scientific, legal, and administrative resources to assess, document, monitor, protect and support the health of the land. Fundraising and education efforts require time and resources to create awareness among land-owners, members, and school groups, and to engage communities with our mission.

Your support makes it all possible.

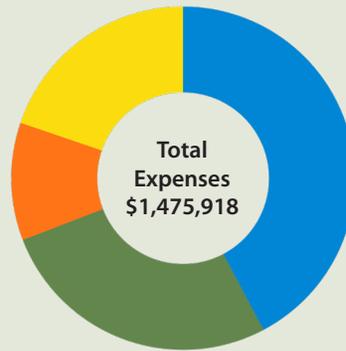


*To put this chart in perspective, the 27,018 acres the Conservancy has protected over the past 28 years is about the size of Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, or roughly 33 times the size of New York City's Central Park.

Expense Allocation

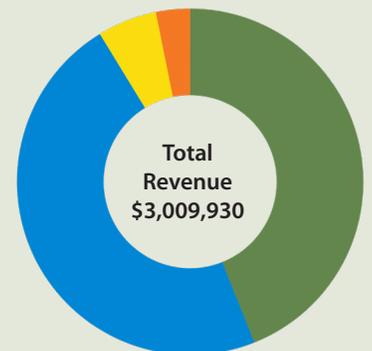


FY 2024-25 Expense Allocation



Land Management	\$ 623,509
Land Protection	396,917
Core Mission Support	291,767
Education & Outreach	163,725
Total Expenses	\$ 1,475,918

FY 2024-25 Fundraising Revenue



Contributions	\$ 1,424,014
Investment Income	1,323,011
Grants	167,150
Special Events	95,755
Total Revenue	\$ 3,009,930

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is committed to strong fiscal health. The financial summary above is based on the complete financial audit that was conducted by Hawkins Ash CPAs. Their full report is available on our website or by contacting us at 608-784-3606 ext.1.

Support conservation close to home by giving through your IRA

Every day, your donations are making a difference close to home by providing funds for restoration efforts, land management activities, and the day-to-day operations of this local land trust, which makes it possible to protect the birds, bees, frogs, turtles, butterflies, and other wildlife that depend on native habitats to do their jobs in our shared ecosystems. Our next generation of people, plants, and animals rely on us to protect the prairies, forests, wetlands, streams, and farmlands to nourish their bodies, lift their spirits, and thrive in the natural world.

Charitable gifts from your IRA are a way we can work together locally to protect the Driftless.

The work behind the wins

Thank you to the many talented volunteers and board members who help us throughout the year with habitat restoration, photography, presentations and hikes, board and committee duties, mailings, data entry, writing, graphic design, proofreading, auctioneering, cookie baking, videography, easement monitoring, and more.



Volunteer with us!



Membership matters



You become an annual member of Mississippi Valley Conservancy with a donation of any amount. Conserving land is a team effort, and membership means celebrating shared success and standing with a community dedicated to shaping the future of the Drifless Area.

We believe you give what you can to protect farmland, forests, streams, and wildlife habitat. With so many options for where your dollars can make an impact, we are incredibly thankful to have earned your trust and support over time to protect lands close to home.

We hope you'll share your excitement with friends, family, and neighbors who share your values, and encourage them to become members of Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 2026.

Room to roam:

How you are helping bobcat families close to home

By Karen Solverson

Tucked quietly in a patch of protected woodlands in the Driftless Area, a mother bobcat watches as her three kittens tumble in the underbrush, curious and full of life. Ever alert, her mission is to keep her kittens safe and teach them how to make a life in this wild space. Both eagles and bobcats were rare in the 1970s and 1980s, but now we are hearing regular reports of both from our landowners. In fact, we now take eagle sightings for granted.

These sightings are a powerful reminder of what spring is all about: new beginnings, wild beauty, and the quiet hope that comes with a future made possible through care and protection. And it's also a reminder of just how far we've come—because



Although rare in the 1970s, more bobcat sightings than ever have been reported by landowners in the Driftless Area in the past year. (Photo by Sheryl Pearson)

not long ago, scenes like this were nearly impossible to find in our region.

In the 1980s, bobcats were almost absent from southwestern Wisconsin. Habitat loss, unregulated trapping, and property fragmentation pushed these elusive cats out of much of their native range. But in the decades since, something remarkable has happened. Thanks to the protection of large, connected tracts of natural habitat—made possible by people like you—the bobcat population has begun to recover. Today, sightings are on the rise, and families like this one are once again finding the space they need to survive.

Bobcats are a powerful symbol of what it

means to protect land not just for today, but for tomorrow. These wild cats need intact forests, clean water, and quiet places to raise their young—just like we all want safe, healthy places to raise our own families. When you support Mississippi Valley Conservancy, you're not just protecting prairies and woodlands. You're helping create a future where wildlife thrives, where children grow up with woods filled with bird songs and wildflowers, and where we all have the chance to feel rooted in something lasting and good.

Every acre protected is a promise kept—to the animals who depend on it, to the people who

cherish it, and to future generations who will walk these same trails and know they are part of something worth protecting. Your generosity ensures that these bobcat kittens will have the space to explore and grow, just as your own children or grandchildren will have the freedom to experience the wonder of wild places.

This spring, as life blooms across the Driftless Area, we hope you'll see this mother and her kittens as a sign of what's possible close to home—when compassion leads, when conservation is rooted in community, and when hope is alive and well in the woods.



The Stewardship Circle

Members of this special group of Conservancy supporters have made a lasting commitment to land protection through a variety of estate-planning tools. These include bequests in a will or trust, charitable gift annuities, IRA designations, and gifts of life insurance.

Please consider joining this dedicated group of conservationists today by making Mississippi Valley Conservancy a part of your legacy plan.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Jen Abrahamzon | Aimee Ebersold |
| Dave Bange | Van and Mary* Elston |
| Allan Beatty | Donald and Linda Eppelheimer |
| Dennis and Joyce Beekman | Robert Fisher* |
| Sara Bentley | Jim Fowler |
| Thomas Boston* | Barbara and Donald* Frank |
| Jim* and Jan Brady | DK Franson |
| Ellen Brooks | David* and Nancy* Goode |
| Dianna Brown | M. Jane Greenewald |
| Kurt Brownell* | Dianne Greenley |
| Mark and Jennifer Brumm | Kim Hammer |
| Deborah Buffton | Bud Hammes |
| and Stephen Minnema | Mark and Anne-Marie Hein |
| David Burbach | Carl* F. Herrmann |
| Ed Burgess | and Joan B. Higgins |
| Tom Byerly | Ed Hill |
| Frank and Kristi* Cadwell | Lin and Todd Huffman |
| Peg Zappen and Pat Caffrey | Tim Jacobson |
| Emily Campbell* | Niels and Elizabeth Jensen |
| Roy Campbell | Maggie Jones and David Linton |
| Stephen and Susan Carpenter | Sharon and George* Kerckhove |
| Bill Cary | Gear Kimmel |
| Abigail Church | Maureen Kinney |
| Susan Colliton | Sue Knopf and Jim* Rothwell |
| Dean* and Phylis* Dempsey | Carl and Ann Korschgen |
| Wanda M. DuCharme, MD | Sue Krause |
| and Edgar Storey | Al and Carol* Kube |

Conservation made poss

Deeply grateful...

Everything we accomplish begins with the commitment of our members—and this year, that impact was amplified by the generous support of grants from many dedicated partners. Together, you share a belief that protecting the Driftless Area is about more than land; it's about investing in the communities we call home and building a future filled with healthy habitats,

clean water, and places to explore for generations to come.

- Thank you...*
- Atira Conservation*
 - John C. Bock Foundation*
 - Cleary-Kumm Foundation*
 - Knowles-Nelson*
 - Stewardship Fund*
 - La Crosse County*
 - National Wild Turkey Federation*
 - Schlecht Family Foundation*
 - Wild Turkey Stamp*
 - Wisconsin DNR*
 - Wisconsin Land Fund*
 - Xcel Energy*



At the 2025 Bluffland Guardian picnic, Pat and Bobbie Wilson shared stories and a meal with friends of the Conservancy. (Photo by Karen Solverson)

John and Louise Leary
 Mark and Jean Ledman
 Chuck and Linda Lee
 Lennie Lichter
 Denise Loveland
 Ron and Aileen* Luethe
 Rita McGaughey*
 Richard* and Jan* Meloy
 The Mikas
 Al Miller*
 Maureen Mooney and Poppy
 David Morrison
 Pamela and Martin Murphy
 Jim Murray
 Kathy Neidert
 Michael and Sylvia O'Brien
 Gretchen Pfeiffer
 Allan Pischke
 Ann Sherry Pott
 Ron and Jane Rada
 Brian and Christine Reynolds
 Mike and Kathy Ripp
 Robert "Bob" C. Ross
 Gerard Rugowski
 and Jayne Stokke
 Kenny and Mary Kay Salwey
 Christine Saudek

Gary and Susan Schettle
 Marc and Sue Schultz
 C. Marit Sherry
 Tom* and Michelle Strange
 Mary Rose Strassser-Colclough
 Sue Strehl
 Craig and Mary Thompson
 Eric Thompson
 and Mary Graziano
 Keith and Lynne Valiquette
 Laura VanderLei
 and Matthew Kubly
 Janet Wollam and Dana Fisher
 Nick and Yonok Zeller

*Deceased

In times of loss, your decision to think of the land speaks volumes. We extend our heartfelt thanks to those who encouraged memorial gifts to the Conservancy this past year, helping ensure that care for nature endures for generations to come.

We thank these generous organizations for their support in 2025

DIAMOND

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
 Johns, Flaherty & Collins, SC
 News 8 Now
 Olson Solar Energy
 Radisson Hotel La Crosse
 Vendi Advertising
 WXOW-News 19

GOLD

Associated Bank, N.A.
 Big River Magazine
 Fowler & Hammer General Contractors
 Hawkins Ash CPAs, LLP
 J.F. Brennan Company, Inc.
 Strive 2 Thrive Coulee Region

SILVER

Dairyland Power Cooperative
 Emplify Health at Gundersen
 F.J. Robers Co., LLC
 Mayo Clinic Health System
 Organic Valley
 People's Food Cooperative
 Rivoli Theatre
 Seymour Law Office, LLC
 Ten Mile Ranch
 Trust Point, Inc.

CONSERVATION SUPPORTERS

Altra Financial Advisors
 Explore La Crosse
 MOKA
 Powered Printing by Dairyland Power
 ReSource Vintage Rental

Contact Development Associate
 Shane Drey to add your name
 here next year!

Shane@MississippiValleyConservancy.org

ible...
because of you.

Members matter...

This year marks a small but intentional change in our Annual Report. As the Conservancy membership continues to grow, we are reimagining how our Annual Report can best serve our members. Rather than printing a lengthy member list, we've chosen to dedicate more space to the stories, landscapes, and conservation successes your support made possible this year.

We've learned that meaningful thanks and clear stories of impact matter far more to our supporters than seeing their name in print. By reclaiming this space, we can better honor your generosity by showing what you made possible on the land and in our communities. Please know this change reflects our deep appreciation for every member who stands with us.



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 La Crosse, WI 54601
 608.784.3606
MississippiValleyConservancy.org
info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 27,018 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands in Buffalo, Crawford, Grant, Jackson, La Crosse, Monroe, Richland, Trempealeau, and Vernon counties since its founding in 1997. Over 7,000 acres are open to the public for recreation.

Board of Directors

- Allan Beatty, President
- Karen Kouba, Vice President
- Scott Turnbull, Treasurer
- Rob Tyser, Secretary
- Pat Caffrey Tom Lukens
- Tim Dakin Randy Poelma
- Sue Dillenbeck Daniel Sambu
- Barbara Frank Ross Seymour
- (Emerita) Dave Skoloda
- Philip Gelatt (Emeritus)
- (Emeritus) Gretchen Skoloda
- Julie Haas (Emerita)
- Bud Hammes Pam Thiel
- Drake Hokanson Craig Thompson
- Danielle Hudson (Emeritus)
- Chris Huiras Steve Ventura
- Maureen Kinney Janet Wollam
- Fred Koerschner Krysten Zummo

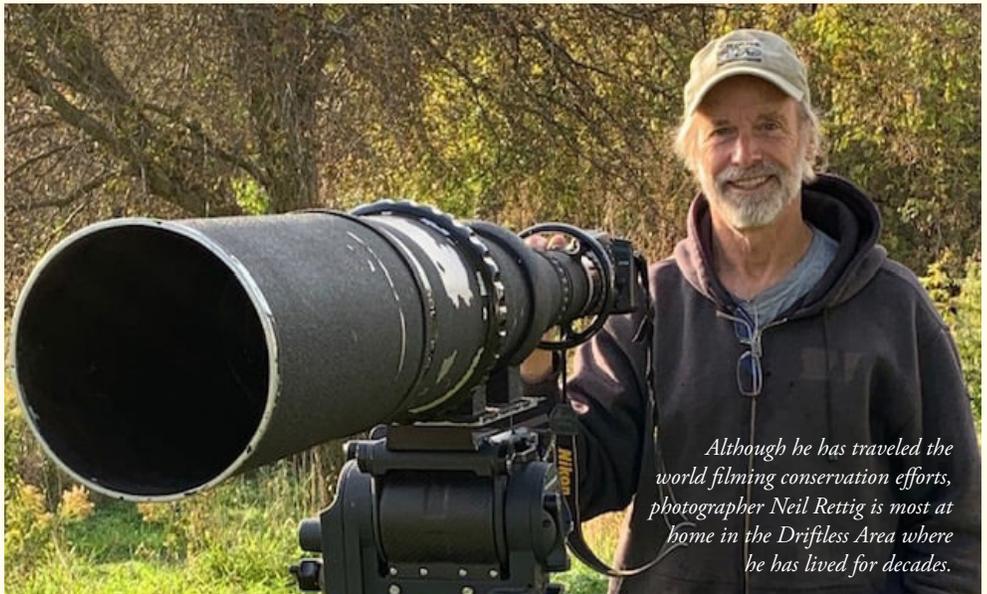
Staff

- Carol Abrahamzon, *Executive Director*
- Abbie Church, *Conservation Director*
- Chris Kirkpatrick, *Conservation Manager*
- Connor Kotte, *Stewardship Specialist*
- Karen Solverson, *Communications Director*
- Kendra Brown, *Paralegal*
- Levi Plath, *Land Manager*
- Michael Reitz, *Restoration Ecologist*
- Mitchel Block, *Conservation Specialist*
- Payton Lott, *Restoration Coordinator*
- Shane Drey, *Development Associate*
- Tiffany Brubaker, *Administrative Manager*

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SAVE *the* DATE!



Although he has traveled the world filming conservation efforts, photographer Neil Rettig is most at home in the Driftless Area where he has lived for decades.

2026 Annual Friends Gathering March 28, 2026, 8:30 a.m. - Noon First Congregational Church, La Crosse

Join us for coffee and breakfast goodies as we celebrate the past year and welcome six-time Emmy Award winning cinematographer and National Geographic photographer Neil Rettig, who will share behind-the-scenes insights into his recent grass-land bird conservation projects. Watch your mail for an invitation. Online registration coming soon!