

# CONSERVED

25 YEARS  
SINCE  
1997

Mississippi Valley  
CONSERVANCY

SAVING  
THE DRIFTLESS...



Portraits by Vendi



...FOR THEM





SUGAR CREEK BLUFF, HIGH ABOVE THE RIVER TOWN OF FERRYVILLE, WISCONSIN, IS A TREASURED AND VIBRANT SITE WITH HIKING AND EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES THAT CHALLENGE THE MIND AND ARE EASY ON THE VISITOR.

**ON THE COVER:** Plum Creek is a Class I trout stream that flows through the Plum Creek Conservation Area, recently acquired by Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Much of land will continue to be farmed and grazed while integrating regenerative farming practices as part of the management plan. Photo courtesy of Samuel Li.

**FOUNDING MEMBERS - AND THEIR OCCUPATION AT THE TIME**

**CRAIG THOMPSON** - WISCONSIN DNR BIOLOGIST | **MARY THOMPSON** - TEACHER

**MAUREEN KINNEY** - LAWYER | **CHARLES LEE** - UW-LA CROSSE HISTORY PROFESSOR

**PEG ZAPPEN** - LA CROSSE PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

**BARBARA FRANK** - SIERRA CLUB OFFICER | **PAT WILSON** - ENGINEER

**FRED LESHER** - AUDUBON SOCIETY MEMBER | **ANN KORSCHGEN** - UW-LA CROSSE PROFESSOR AND ADMINISTRATOR

**GRETCHEN PFEIFFER** - WISCONSIN DNR RIVER SPECIALIST | **GRETCHEN AND DAVID SKOLODA** - NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS

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



# Thanks to you, 25 years is just the beginning...

**I**t wasn't so many years ago that the task of protecting our beautiful and cherished bluffs, prairies, forests and farmland seemed impossible.

There was no organization for farm families to call upon when they could see development happening all around them. There was no team of staff, volunteers, supporters and partners to create a vision—and help make it happen.

There wasn't a conservation organization that cared about wildlife and wildlife habitat, farmlands and local culture, clean water and slowing climate change, and the need for everyone to be able to enjoy and experience nature close to home.

In fact, 25 years ago, the community as a whole wasn't thinking about conservation here in Wisconsin in a manner that integrated a sense of place, the long arc of history and today's greatest environmental challenges. Yet, because of you, here we are.

We pay tribute to the families and communities who have conserved

their lands—and to all those who care deeply for this place we call “the Driftless.” So many of them were the basis for forming our land trust, 25 years ago. Their vision and legacy live on. And we honor the indigenous peoples who were the first caretakers of these lands. The Conservancy's first 25 years created a strong foundation from which to launch the next 25 years—at a time when local land conservation is more important than ever to the health and well-being of people from all walks of life.

Together with a caring community, we are working to save this place for children to catch frogs, taste wild raspberries, splash in cold creeks, climb trees, pick pumpkins and apples with their families, and discover the wonders of nature.

We're saving the Driftless for them.

Together with you, we know we must increase the pace of conservation to combat the causes and effects of climate change. We need to try new things and connect with and serve more people than ever before. We must protect the wildlife and farmlands that serve

everyone. And we must save more places so that every child, and every person, in our corner of the planet can enjoy welcoming, safe and enriching outdoor experiences.

That's not to say it will be easy. It never was. Indeed, it's a very challenging time. But thanks to you, and so many like you, we look forward to expanding the impact and dream of conserving the Driftless Area while there's still time. Thank you for all you have done to make the future one where we can honor the past while stepping forward to embrace the future.

Together in conservation,

Carol Abrahamzon,  
Executive Director

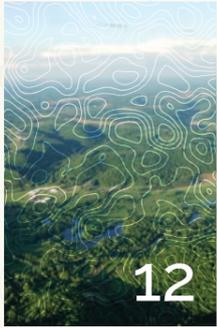


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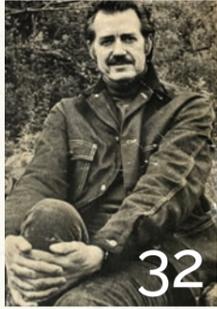
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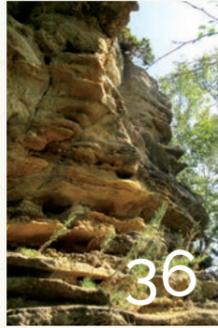
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## THE LAND. OUR FUTURE.



MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY'S 25+ NATURE PRESERVES OFFER PUBLIC ACCESS TO OUTDOOR RECREATION AND SCENIC BEAUTY IN WISCONSIN'S DRIFTLESS AREA.

Photo by Yendi



# HOW IT ALL STARTED: PROTECTING LAND FOR YOU

BY GRETCHEN PFEIFFER

FROM ITS EARLY DAYS OF CONSERVING THE BLUFFLANDS OF LA CROSSE TO ITS PROTECTION OF NATIVE WILDLIFE HABITATS AND FARMLANDS IN A NINE-COUNTY AREA, MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY HAS WORKED AND CONTINUES TO WORK WITH INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES AND PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF WISCONSIN'S DRIFTLESS AREA.

**I**n the early 1990s, subdivisions were multiplying along the blufflands of the Upper Mississippi River (UMR). Completely halting this development was not expected, but there were concerns that development would permanently change the unspoiled character of the 300-mile corridor of the viewshed.

As a new employee of the Mississippi River Team for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI-DNR) it was my job to work with the other states along the Upper Mississippi River. Through a partnership with the Minnesota Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission (MWBAC), a series of six meetings was held in Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin to gauge the sentiment of the citizens who lived along the river and find out whether they would consider some form of conservation measures for the river bluffs. I attended most of these meetings and collectively we found interest in conservation by some citizens—but there were also those who were concerned about government conservation and mandates on these lands. These sentiments were fueled by the Lower Wisconsin Waterways designation, and it became clear that a similar designation was not possible for the blufflands of the Mississippi River.

A regional foundation took the findings from the meetings to heart and set up a workshop between the state natural resource agencies, area land trusts, board commissioners of MWBAC and other concerned citizens to consider a regional approach to private land conservation in the UMR blufflands.



At the conclusion of the workshop in the spring of 1993, the group decided to pursue a regional land trust model for conserving this unique landscape. The group became known as the Blufflands Alliance. Each state would designate a land trust as a point of contact for the endeavor and the McKnight Foundation would help to fund the efforts. Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois had functioning land trusts, but Wisconsin was without one in the southwestern portion of the state. Initially, the Wisconsin Farmland Conservancy, based in Menomonie, WI, filled the role, but it was clear that to make a difference we needed a land trust on the ground working in the blufflands.

As the Blufflands Alliance was gathering steam, conservation efforts in the La Crosse area were also building. The convergence of the local work in La Crosse with the regional work of the Blufflands Alliance resulted in the founding of Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

With its ability to bring local resources together, the newly formed conservancy attracted support from one of the region's largest foundations. The McKnight Foundation was inspired by the energy of the new board and the potential of the organization, a regional land trust, to help support land conservation in the Driftless Area.

The Blufflands Alliance became a highly effective regional conservation movement and eventually McKnight funded not only the organizations but also provided funds to help the land trusts purchase and/or protect properties with conservation easements. The Conservancy used some of these funds,

together with funds from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, to help with early acquisitions including our first acquisition at Sugar Creek Bluff near Ferryville, Wisconsin.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy has become one of the most successful land trusts of the Blufflands Alliance and of the state of Wisconsin. There are many reasons for this success, but strong conservation-minded founders and loyal supporters have been key to the early and continued conservation outcomes in our area.

I'm ecstatic about what this organization has done in 25 years and what it means for conservation in Western Wisconsin and the Upper Mississippi River corridor.

During the next quarter century the Conservancy will continue to be a pivotal force for conserving our heritage of natural river blufflands, wetlands, forests, farmlands and freshwater to provide habitat, recreation and economic opportunities for nature and people.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Gretchen Pfeiffer's** entire career has focused on conservation of the Upper Mississippi River—most recently in her work for The Nature Conservancy. She's a founding member of Mississippi Valley Conservancy and she currently serves as board vice president.



# MAPPING THE FUTURE WE SHARE

BY SARAH BRATNOBER

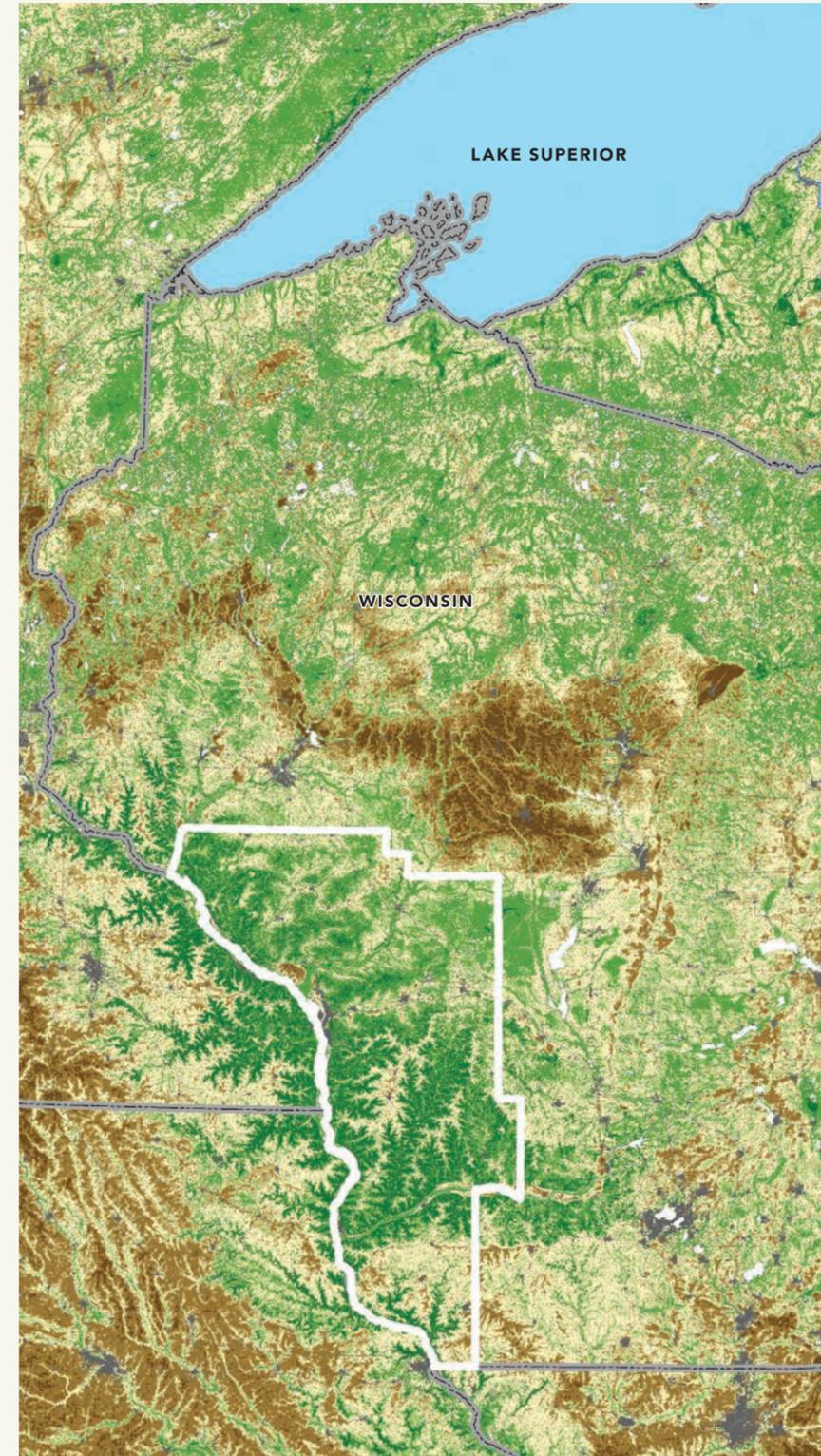
**H**ave you ever considered how Wisconsin's Driftless Area could look in another fifty or hundred years? Will the people of the region have succeeded in preserving its beauty and productivity in the face of climate change and development? If you've wondered about the future of this beautiful place, we offer a new way of seeing how Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) and other land conservation partners are responding to concerns about what lies ahead.

We are fortunate to have a strong foundation and a well-defined conservation strategy on which to build.

Within our nine-county service area (shown at right), MVC has set priority areas in which to concentrate our work, based on the region's most important and/or threatened natural resources. Recently developed mapping tools from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) show that our priority areas also match up with the most biodiverse and climate-resilient

areas in southwest Wisconsin (see map). MVC will use this tool as a guide in project selection.

By concentrating our land protection projects within these priority areas, MVC is able to maximize its conservation impact. This focus also helps partners collaborate with us and create corridors of connected undeveloped lands that collectively help preserve the natural, scenic and cultural character of our corner of the planet.



Map of Resilient and Connected Lands courtesy of the Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin

## RESILIENT AND CONNECTED LANDS

Mississippi Valley Conservancy's land protection projects have long been prioritized by the objective of connecting lands to establish undeveloped corridors for wildlife. In recent years, the Resilient and Connected Lands analysis of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has provided further data on which to base our project priorities. Their Resilient Lands Map shown on this page illustrates the diversity of the watersheds in Wisconsin's Driftless Area.

The Nature Conservancy describes high priority conservation landscapes as "sites that continue to support biological diversity, productivity and ecological function even as they change in response to climate change." Resilient sites buffer their resident species by providing diverse microclimates that allow plants and animals to persist locally even as the regional climate appears unsuitable for them, thus slowing the rate of climate change, say the TNC resilience scientists.

The inset maps on the following pages have been simplified to show the evolving corridors of connected lands, both public and private, that are protected by Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and various municipalities. The parcels of land are undifferentiated on the maps to protect the privacy of those whose land we protect without public access.

To learn more about the Conservancy's public lands, visit the Nature Preserves section of our website at [mississippivalleyconservancy.org](https://mississippivalleyconservancy.org).

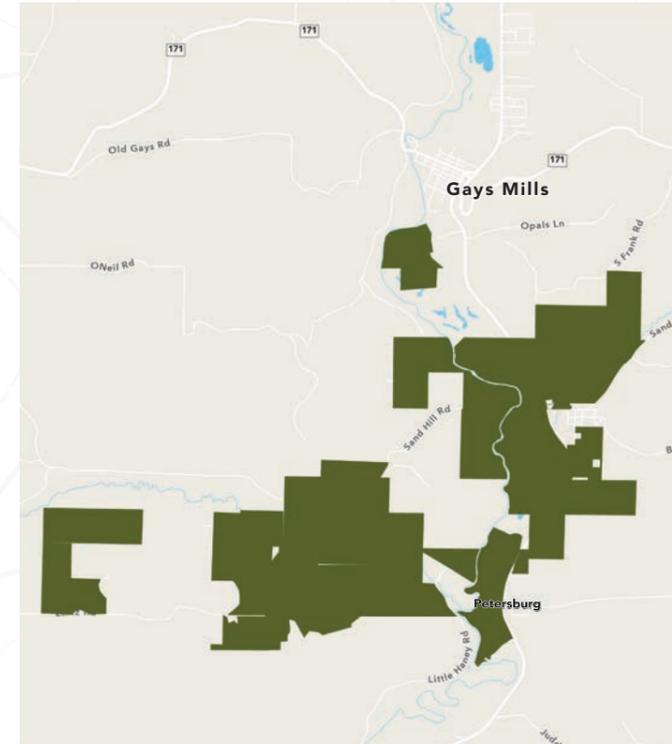
Corridors of connected land are also considered by conservation biologists to be the best protection for our area's diverse native wildlife as development and climate change continue to occur.

Cartography of the area newly captures the changing shape of land conservation as large blocks of protected land help the region to be more resilient to such threats as flooding and habitat loss. The conservation corridors shown on these pages are just a few examples of the many lands connected and protected by Mississippi Valley Conservancy and partners, including Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, other land trusts and a number

of municipalities. Continuing to connect and protect lands in this way will provide the greatest opportunity for natural communities to thrive here into the future, as they have for millennia. This work is made possible by a community of members, volunteers, landowners and partners who have supported our cause for more than twenty-five years. We invite you to join us as we continue linking protected lands for the health and well-being of future generations. We're saving the Driftless for them. 🐦

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Sarah Bratnober** is communications director for Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Working with members, staff, board and volunteers, she distills stories about our work to generate support for our conservation cause.

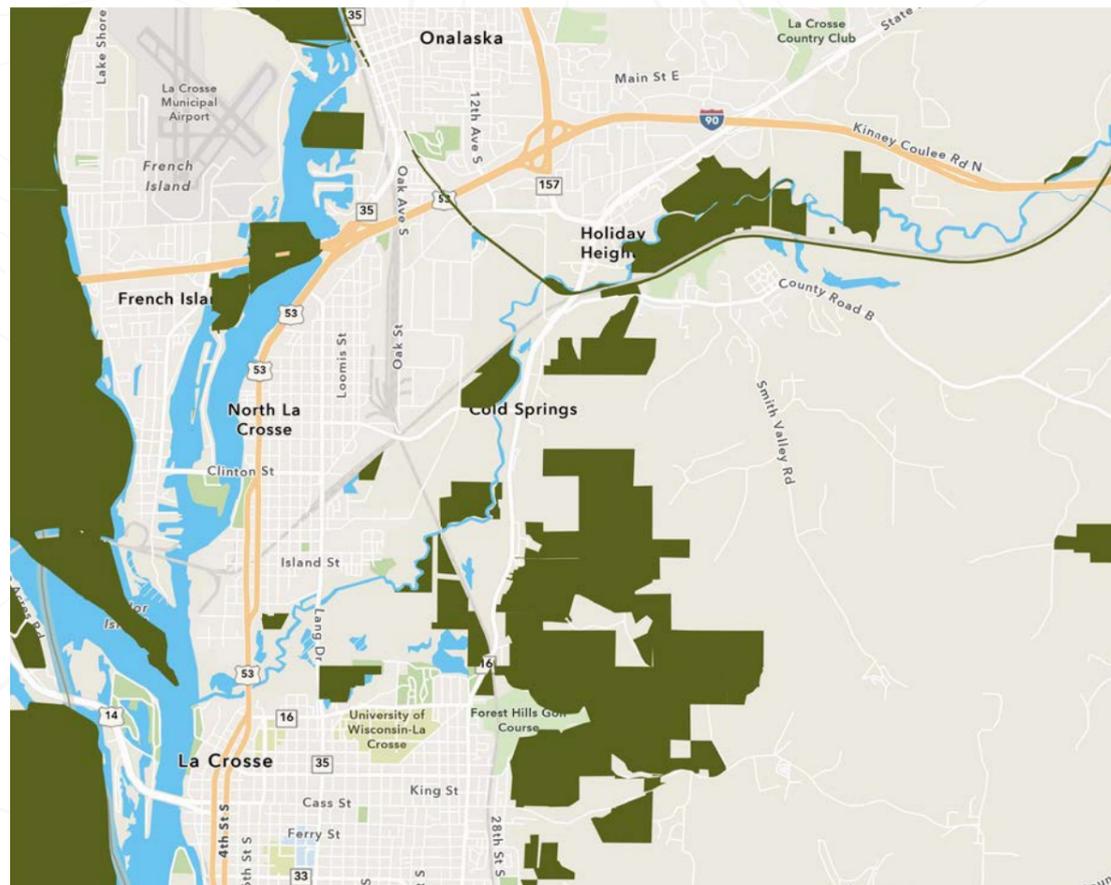


**GAYS MILLS**

The Kickapoo River Valley has been identified by The Nature Conservancy as "far above average" for its resilient and connected lands. This simplified map shows a portion of the growing corridor of connected lands, both public and private, from Gays Mills to just south of Petersburg.



▲ Kickapoo Bottoms Nature Preserve near Gays Mills.



**LA CROSSE**

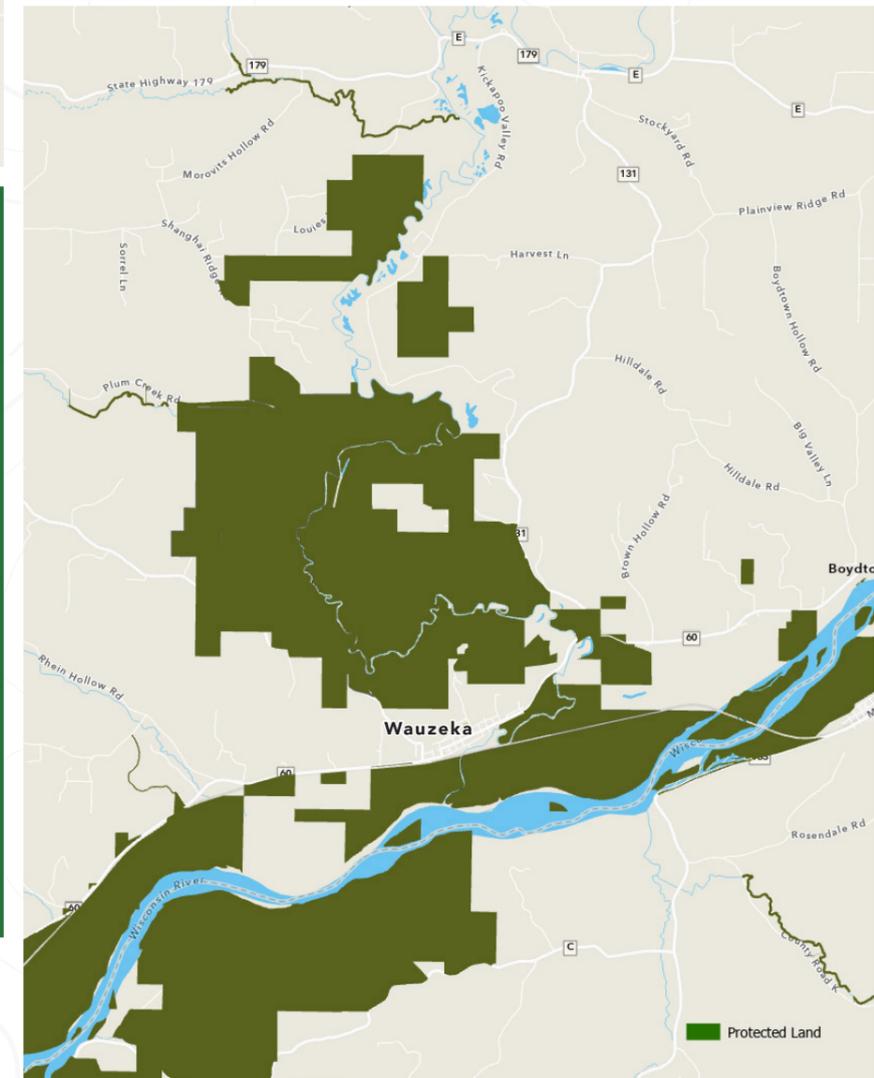
The protected blufflands that serve as a natural backdrop to the City of La Crosse form a growing corridor of wildlife habitats from the north side to the south end of the city.

This simplified map shows a portion of that corridor of connected lands, both public and private, from Interstate 90 to Wisconsin State Highway 33. The parcels of land are undifferentiated on the maps to protect the privacy of landowners.

**WAUZEKA**

Mississippi Valley Conservancy and our conservation partners protect several large corridors of undeveloped land in the Kickapoo River Valley. Perhaps they will be connected in the future. This simplified map shows a portion of the growing corridor of connected lands, both public and private, just north of Wauzeka. The parcels of land are undifferentiated on the maps to protect the privacy of landowners.

Maps on these pages were created by the Conservancy's GIS Mapping Intern, Alex Duran. The maps are for information purposes only; depictions of boundaries are approximate.





# PARTNERS SAVE PLUM CREEK CONSERVATION AREA FOR COMMUNITY AND WILDLIFE

BY DAVE SKOLODA

That the woods, waters and wild beauty of the Driftless Area would become popular with the millions of people who live in the urban areas that surround us was predicted half a century ago. That prediction has come true and the pressure on the land for residential subdivision and more intensive agriculture and recreation uses, also predicted, has happened as well. Add to that the increasing threat of climate change and we see the urgency of protecting more land in connected corridors. Such corridors of undeveloped land provide the space and conditions for wildlife to move and adapt to changes in climate and allow for the maintenance of wild landscapes that are vital to the economy of the region.

Thanks to you, the Driftless story continues...

THE LOWER KICKAPOO RIVER MEANDERS THROUGH THE 1,600-ACRE PLUM CREEK CONSERVATION AREA IN CRAWFORD COUNTY WHICH IS PROTECTED BY MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY TO SAFEGUARD WILDLIFE HABITATS, FARMLAND AND WATER. EXISTING HUNTING AND FISHING EASEMENTS REMAIN IN PLACE.



Plum Creek Conservation Area is rich in streams and creeks that flow into the lower Kickapoo River. A primary goal of the land management plan to be developed will be the protection of these waters and all who depend upon them.

It's safe to say that those of us who started the Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 1997 didn't dream that one day we would purchase for \$3 million one of the most prized natural areas in the state. But that's what just happened, in part because we knew that there was a need for a land trust in Southwest Wisconsin and, over time, built the capacity to be a partner in such a landmark project.

The Wisconsin Land Legacy Report, published by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, describes the 1,600 acres the Conservancy recently purchased on the lower Kickapoo River in Crawford County as "one of the most diverse assemblages of natural communities in the state." It includes a stretch of Plum Creek and will be known as Plum Creek Conservation Area. The property includes nearly 30,000 feet along the west bank of the Kickapoo River and 10,900 feet along both banks of Plum Creek, a Class I trout stream. It is next to the state's 1,927-acre Kickapoo Wildlife Area-Wauzeka Unit that includes the 635-acre Kickapoo Wild Woods State Natural Area.

Craig Thompson of the Wisconsin DNR and one of the Conservancy's founders has been working to find ways to conserve the land since the 1980s. He told me that these protected areas, now enlarged by the recent MVC purchase, support one of the highest concentrations of rare forest-interior breeding birds in southern Wisconsin, including many considered to be high conservation priorities in eastern North America.

Most of the money for the purchase of the Plum Creek property came from an anonymous donor who has helped us with other projects. When asked about the gift to buy the land, the donor said: "I love Crawford County and am so fortunate that I can help the real experts who have worked to save this land for future generations. What a joy to live here! And to have this opportunity for habitat protection, in such a unique

place, on such a large scale, this is all beyond my wildest dreams. My deep gratitude goes to all who made this happen, especially to the Lewis family."

The donor's reference to the Lewis family acknowledges the role of the previous owners in keeping the large property intact. And that story includes the conservation motivation that has been part of so many of the Conservancy's projects—the desire of conservation-minded people to leave the landscape intact without the environmental degradation caused by subdivisions.

Robert Lewis, along with family and friends, began buying land for a farm in the 1970s—eventually owning some 3,600 acres. They grazed cattle and cultivated fields in a rotation of corn and hay. Much of the land was under hunting and fishing access easements placed

with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI-DNR) by previous owners. During a downturn in the cattle business in the early 1980s the investors accepted a purchase offer from WI-DNR on what is now known as the Wauzeka Unit. That enabled the investors to pay off their mortgage and continue the cattle operation, said Lewis's son, Peter, in an interview. When Gaylord Nelson was governor of Wisconsin, Robert Lewis was the administration's staff assistant for agriculture. In 1970 he completed a study financed by the Ford Foundation on how to integrate agriculture and rural developments such as second homes without compromising land resources. This led him to a lasting commitment not to carve up the property for hobby farms.

We first met Robert and Peter Lewis in 2013 when they came to La Crosse to discuss providing permanent



## YOUR HELP IS NEEDED

Acquisition of the Plum Creek Conservation Area is only the first step in its conservation. It will take a number of years before the property is healed and restored to its ecological health. That's the challenge that Mississippi Valley Conservancy has taken on.

The Conservancy will work closely over the coming year with our partners at The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin (TNC) and the Savanna Institute to develop a long-range vision and plan for the site to achieve conservation goals that include healthy habitats, water quality protection and resilience to climate change.

To achieve the long-range plan, TNC and other generous donors have helped us establish the Plum Creek Stewardship Endowment with \$250,000. We invite you to help us double that amount in this, our 25th year! For more information about the endowment, visit our website at [mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ways-give](https://mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ways-give)



Photo by Len Harris

THE COLD WATERS OF PLUM CREEK AND OTHER TRIBUTARIES OF THE KICKAPOO RIVER ARE HOME TO SEVERAL TROUT SPECIES. PROTECTION OF THESE WATERS FROM SEDIMENT RUNOFF AND OTHER FORMS OF CONTAMINATION WILL BE A DETERMINING FACTOR IN THE AREA'S FUTURE RECREATION ECONOMY. HERE TIM ARLAND PRESENTS HIS FLY TO AN EAGER TROUT.

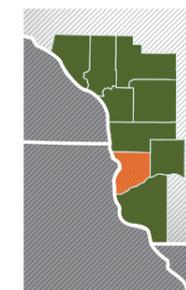
protection for their property. I was the interim executive director of the Conservancy at the time, Pat Caffrey was president and Abbie Church was conservation director. We hiked the land and saw the importance of protecting it as well as the daunting size and scope of the project. Funding was not available at the time, but Abbie continued to work on the project with partners over the ensuing years.

Peter told me at a meeting at the property last November that his father was aware before he died at the age of 101 that his wishes to avoid dividing the property would be realized. And Carol Abrahamzon, MVC executive director, told Peter at that meeting that everyone knew he could have made more money from the property by selling it off in parcels. She expressed gratitude on behalf of the project partners that he kept it whole.

The sale of the property “is the highest possible ending I can imagine,” Peter said. And for those of us who believed something good would come of the nonprofit we founded 25 years ago, Plum Creek is a reminder that we can dream big with more confidence than we might have felt at the beginning. The challenge grows even as we celebrate. 🐟

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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



**PROJECT:** Plum Creek Conservation Area

**LOCATION:** Crawford County

**LANDOWNER:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy

**AREA PRESERVED:** 1,600 acres

**OVERVIEW/VISIT:** The Plum Creek property includes nearly 30,000 feet along the west bank of the Kickapoo River and 10,900 feet along both banks of Plum Creek, a Class I trout stream.

# A LOCAL JEWEL FOR COMMUNITY AND WILDLIFE

BY JOANNE WHITE AND SHERRY QUAMME

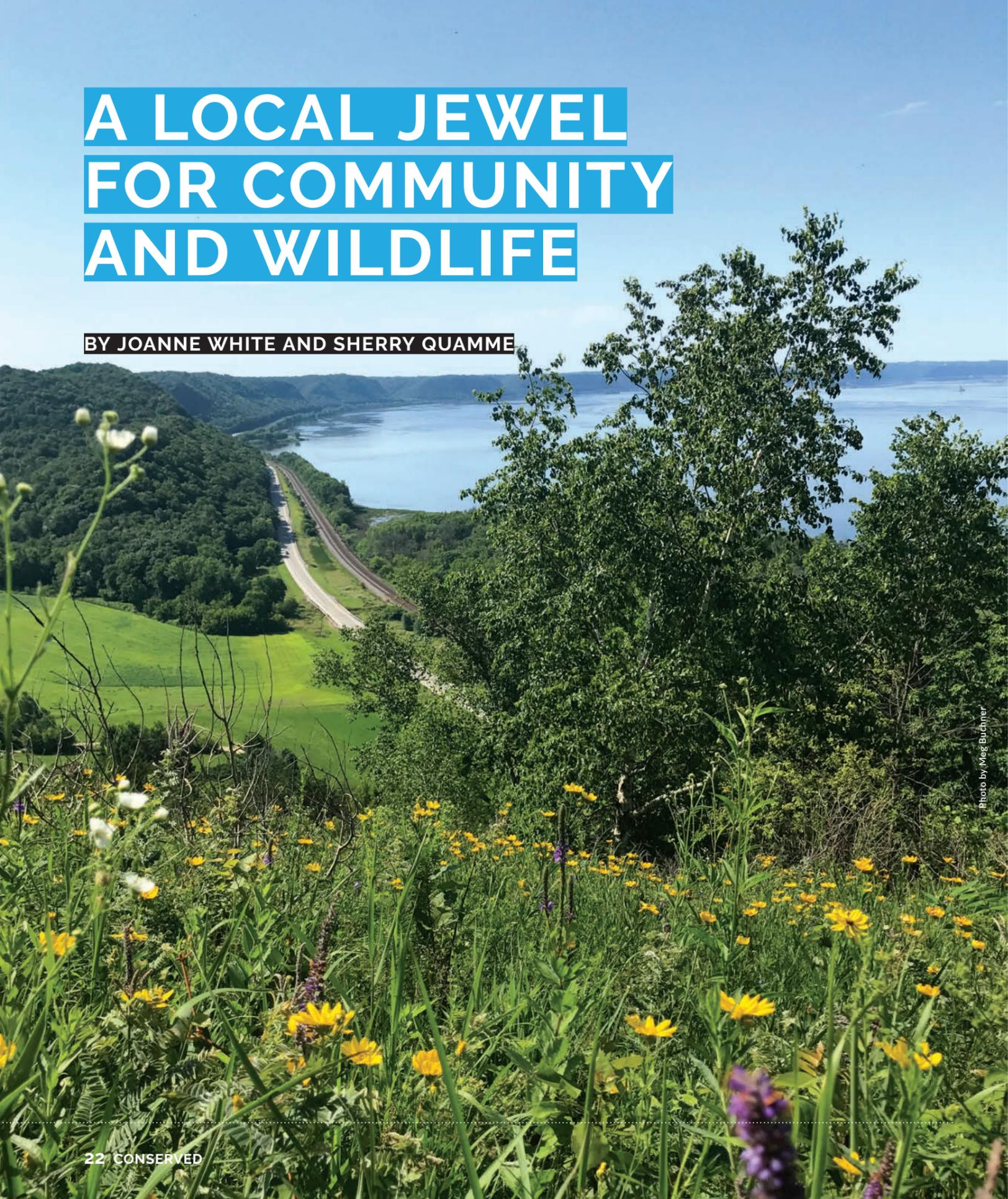


Photo by Meg Buchner

**S**ugar Creek Bluff, high above the river town of Ferryville, Wisconsin, is a treasured and vibrant site with hiking and exploring opportunities that challenge the mind and are easy on the visitor. The trails take you out to a point that provides a breathtaking panoramic view of the Mississippi River Valley plus—this is “The Driftless.” There is a peacefulness about this bluff that immediately connects with the spirit of each person who seeks experiences with nature. It is a place to learn, to explore and to engage with the assets of the great outdoors as well as connect with those you travel with. Listen for the various bird calls. See the wildflowers, snails and mushrooms and hear the cicada’s hum. Watch for wild turkeys. Look up, look around you. There are sights to behold that you will be excited and surprised to see.

The benefits of having Sugar Creek Bluff Natural Area in Ferryville have been both extensive and rewarding. Mississippi Valley Conservancy purchased the first parcel of land in 1999 and has since grown the nature preserve to include 440 acres of prime blufftop land partially included in the Village of Ferryville. The Conservancy has restored the native prairie with prescribed burns, garlic mustard removal and cutting of invasive trees and shrubs such as buckthorn. All of this very labor-intensive work protects native

wildlife species and creates a wonderful hiking and birding area for community members and visitors alike. The economic impact of Sugar Creek Bluff cannot be underestimated. It is common for visitors to stop in at local businesses and/or the Saturday farmer’s market and ask, “How do I get to Sugar Creek Bluff?” Ferryville Tourism Council and the Conservancy secured the required WisDOT Permit in 2021 to install signs on Highway 35 that direct visitors to North Buck Creek Road to help with way-finding. The nature preserve clearly supports our local economy by bringing in visitors who purchase supplies and services from Ferryville businesses. And Sugar Creek Bluff is available all year long.

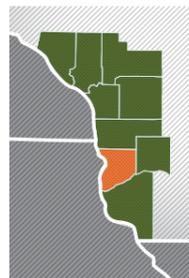
Over the past ten years, the Ferryville Tourism Council has partnered with the Conservancy to co-host the annual International Spring Migration Day hike on the first Saturday of May. This is part of the Conservancy’s Linked to the Land hike series, and it fulfills one of the requirements for Ferryville’s Bird City status. The blufftop woods and goat prairies provide excellent habitat for neotropical birds migrating to our area and beyond for their summer nesting. Many warblers, including the rare Cerulean warbler, have been observed on this hike. A wide range of woodland and prairie wildflowers is also present on the property.

Photographers, hunters, hikers and people looking for a gorgeous view of the Mississippi River from above enjoy the maintained trails and the peaceful woods. A frequent hiker to this property is Meg Buchner—Ferryville resident, local art teacher and social media director for Driftless Wisconsin, an organization that showcases Crawford County, Vernon County and the Kickapoo River Valley. Meg describes this treasure in these words: “Sugar Creek Bluff is a beautiful hike in all seasons. Wildflowers cover the top of the bluff in spring and summer. In fall, it is a blend of autumn colors, and in the winter, the icy view stretches endlessly.”

The trail’s regular maintenance allows us to recommend this property frequently. It is definitely a jewel for our area. 🍂

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Sherry Quamme** and **Joanne White** are the dynamic duo that make sure people slow down and appreciate all the river-town culture and natural beauty of Ferryville, Wisconsin. With both of them on the tourism council and Sherry’s leadership of the WI All American Great River Road National Scenic Byway, you can’t miss their charming town!



**SITE:** Sugar Creek Bluff Natural Area

**LOCATION:** Crawford County

**LANDOWNER:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy

**AREA PRESERVED:** 440 acres

**OVERVIEW/VISIT:** 440 acres of prime blufftop land partially included in the Village of Ferryville. Photographers, hunters, hikers and people looking for a gorgeous view of the Mississippi River from above enjoy the maintained trails and the peaceful woods.



“SUGAR CREEK BLUFF IS A BEAUTIFUL HIKE IN ALL SEASONS. WILDFLOWERS COVER THE TOP OF THE BLUFF IN SPRING AND SUMMER.”

~ MEG BUCHNER



Thomas Roehl, a mycologist from UW-La Crosse, led a recent mushroom foray at Sugar Creek Bluff.



Top photo: Habitat restoration volunteers at Sugar Creek Bluff remained diligent during the pandemic. Bottom right: Birders enjoy the prairie and the river vista.



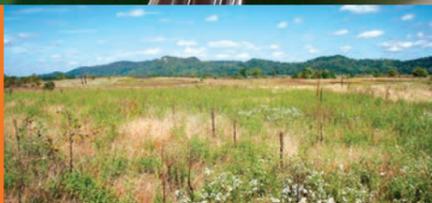
# FOR THE BIRDS: A HABITAT RESTORATION SUCCESS STORY

BY ROB TYSER

NEW AMSTERDAM GRASSLANDS: A 310-ACRE NATURE PRESERVE OWNED AND MANAGED BY MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY FOR THE PROTECTION OF NESTING GRASSLAND BIRDS.

Photo by Dan Jackson

Bell's vireo



I repeat this same routine three times in late spring and early summer: grope my way to our dresser to shut off the 4:15 am alarm, dress, climb into the car and navigate to the nearest all-night Kwik Trip for a cup of coffee, and then head 20 miles north on Highway 53 to the New Amsterdam Grasslands, a 310-acre nature preserve owned and managed by Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

I park, pull on my hip waders (morning dew out here can be truly amazing!) and slather "Absorbine Jr" on my hat. I've been doing this since 2009, following in the footsteps of Jean Ruhser, who established this sampling project in 2001. She laid out seven 5-acre census areas for these annual early morning bird surveys.

The New Amsterdam Grasslands, purchased in the late 1990s with the financial support of a generous and thoughtful donor, is one of the last undeveloped grasslands in the La Crosse area. This site was recognized as having high conservation value because of its remarkably diverse grassland bird community, a group of species that has declined precipitously throughout North America. When initially acquired, the site was covered with a non-native grass (smooth brome) and criss-crossed with fencerows of woody vegetation. Since 2003, Conservancy staff has steadily been restoring this area to native vegetation by seeding with native grasses and forbs, completing controlled burns and selectively eliminating woody vegetation. Since the time of its acquisition, the site has been increasingly surrounded by housing and commercial developments, transforming it into a "habitat island."

In 2001, Jean Ruhser, then a member of the UW-La Crosse Biology Department, initiated an annual survey of birds that occur during the breeding season in this grassland. Since 2009, I've continued her work, so that the Conservancy now has a 20+ year record of bird observations on the site.

**So how have the birds been faring? Here are some of our findings to date:**

A fairly constant number of species (about 28 to 35) has been detected each year in our study plots, with clay-colored sparrows becoming the most abundant species. Several other species (eastern meadowlark, dickcissel, sedge wren and Henslow's sparrow) have steadily persisted, though their numbers often fluctuate substantially from one year to the next. Unfortunately, grasshopper sparrows, which initially increased in abundance, have declined significantly since 2011. And one of the most spectacular species (and my personal favorite), the bobolink, declined steadily and has not

nesting here since 2017. Observations by others suggest that this species does still nest in the vicinity, so it is possible that it may return in the future. On a more positive note, the abundant numbers of field sparrows and Bell's vireos continue to increase.



Photo by Dan Jackson



Photo by Laura Erickson

Left photo: Clay-colored sparrow, right photo: Field sparrow

Nearly all of the species nesting in this grassland are neotropical migrants—that is, they breed in northern latitudes but then migrate south, overwintering in the tropics or subtropics. For these species, successful conservation efforts must maintain their breeding habitat, but additional areas in their migration pathways and overwintering areas must also exist for them to thrive.

One final note: this grassland has lacked a regularly occurring avian predator species. However, I've observed an American kestrel hovering and diligently searching for prey in 2020 and 2021. Perhaps this species may become a permanent member of this grassland bird community. I hope so! 🦅

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rob Tyser** retired from the Biology Department at UW-La Crosse in 2015, where he taught courses in general biology, zoology, ecology and evolution for 37 years. He serves on the Conservancy board and helps us stay abreast of the latest science related to climate change.





# HAVING HER CAKE AND EATING IT TOO: A FARMER PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

BY SARAH BRATNOBER AND KRISTEN ZUMMO

**I**n a time when more than 2,000 acres of U.S. agricultural land are converted every day to nonagricultural use and small farms are swallowed up by conglomerate ones, one farm couple's long-range planning bucks those trends. Karen Hanson has lived on the Hanson family farm since marrying Bud Hanson in 1981. Bud's father was born on the farm in the 1890s, and together father and son farmed and cared for the land. Today, five years after Bud's passing, Karen manages the farm while working to ensure its conservation, and she recently entered into a conservation agreement with the Conservancy.

The Hansons' 261-acre farm consists of scenic wooded bluffs and rolling organic farmland within the Middle Trempealeau River watershed. The property includes pastures and farmland with rich, productive soils for farming, diverse habitats for wildlife and numerous water resources.

Bud Hanson and his father raised a variety of livestock on the farm including dairy cattle, Aberdeen Angus beef cattle and pigs, in addition to corn, hay and small grains. All of this was done without chemical inputs, and Bud and Karen chose to keep it that way. To manage the farm while also working off the farm, they sold the livestock and certified the land for organic production. Today, part of the farmland is rented for summer grazing and part is

THE HANSON FARM, WITH ITS DIVERSE WILDLIFE HABITATS AND FERTILE ORGANIC SOIL, IS FOREVER PROTECTED FROM FUTURE SUBDIVISION, DEVELOPMENT AND MINING BY A CONSERVATION AGREEMENT WITH MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY. KAREN HANSON AND HER FRIEND LADY ENJOY WALKING THE PROPERTY EACH DAY.



rented for organic crops produced along contours of the land for the prevention of soil erosion.

According to a recent study by the American Farmland Trust (AFT), some 249,800 acres of Wisconsin farmland were developed or compromised between 2001 and 2016. Of that, 83,700 acres were rated as “best agricultural land” and of the land converted 71,600 acres were converted to low-density residential development. That’s part of a national trend during the same period in which 11 million acres of U.S. agricultural land were paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture, curtailing sustainable food production, economic opportunities and the environmental benefits afforded by well-managed farmland and ranchland.

The AFT study pointed out that “climate change, including increases in frequency and intensity of extremes, has adversely impacted food security.” AFT cited the finding of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that less productive and degraded agricultural lands restrict what can be grown and reduce the soil’s ability to absorb carbon. It is this dual role—both food production and providing a natural solution

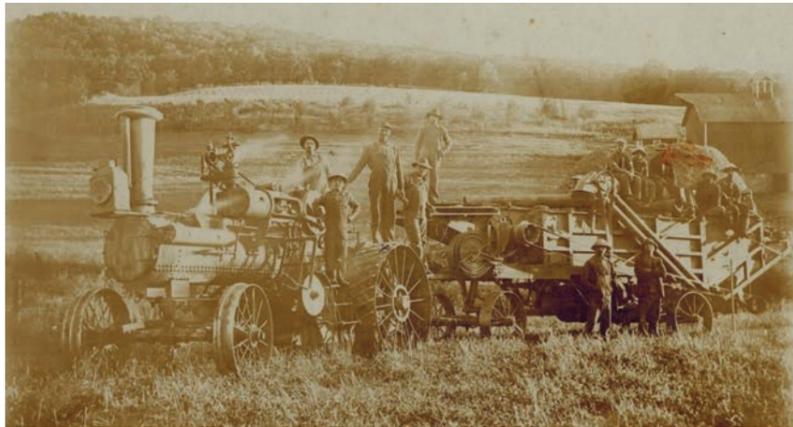
for climate change—that makes preserving farmland like the Hanson property vital.

The majority of American farmers are over 65 years of age, suggesting an impending transfer of land and a serious threat to farmland as farms are sold and subsequently subdivided. The Hanson conservation agreement permanently prohibits subdivision and residential development of the land, increasing the chances that another farmer will have the opportunity to care for the land in the future.

Karen continues to own and use the land as she chooses, and future buyers must honor the terms of the agreement. Thus, she gets to have her cake and eat it too. 🍌

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

As communications director and conservation associate for Mississippi Valley Conservancy, respectively, **Sarah** and **Krysten** collaborate to capture stories of land protected through the Conservancy for the benefit of all.



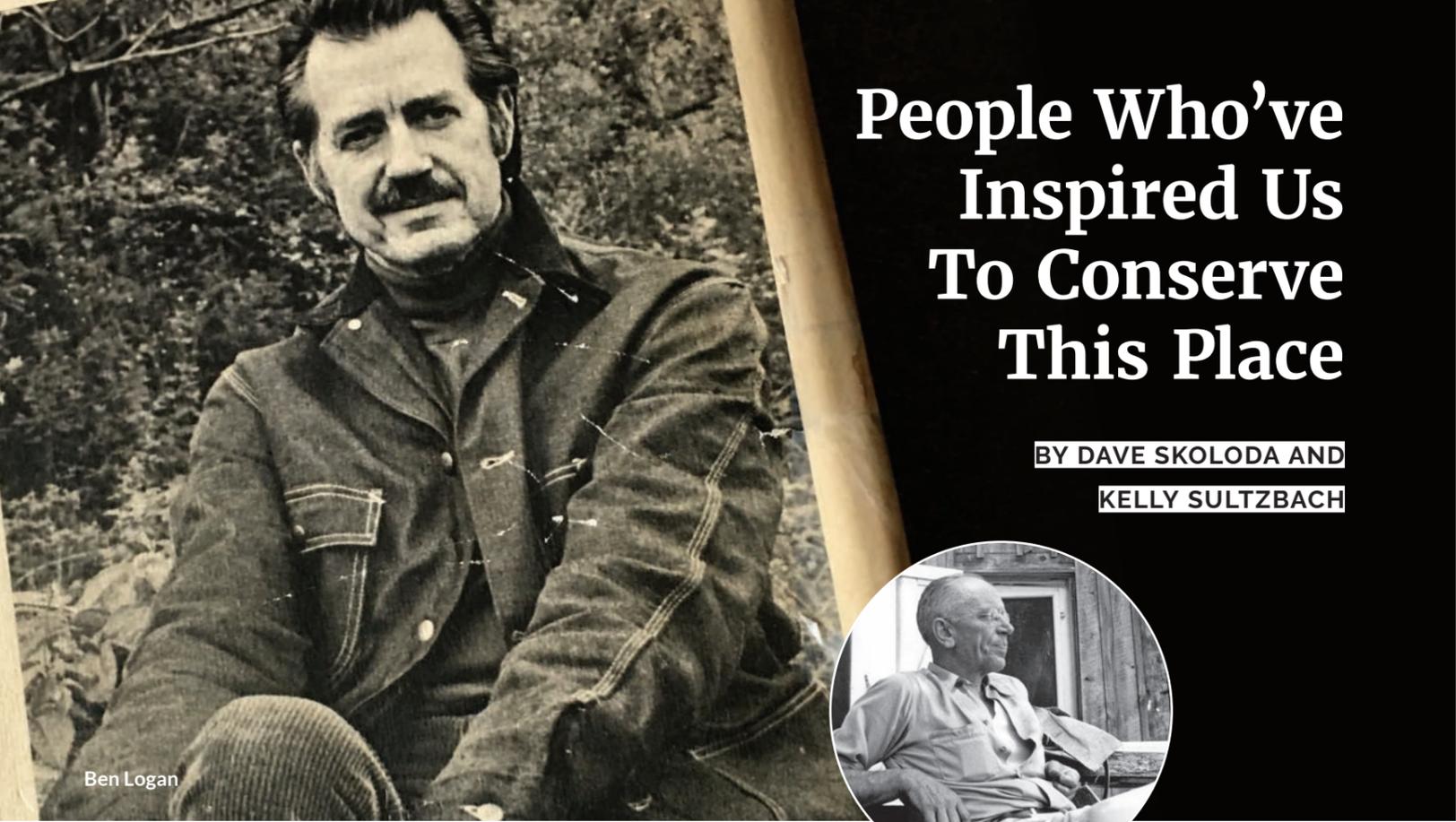
“MANY ASPECTS OF FARMING HAVE CHANGED OVER THE YEARS, BUT WE’VE WORKED HARD TO MAINTAIN THE HEALTH OF THE FARM, THE RICHNESS OF THE SOIL, AND THE NATURAL AREAS FOR WILDLIFE.”

~ KAREN HANSON



**SITE:** The Hanson farm  
**LOCATION:** Trempealeau County  
**LANDOWNER:** Karen Hanson  
**PROTECTED BY:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy  
**AREA PRESERVED:** 261 acres

**OVERVIEW:** For generations, the Hanson land has provided rich, productive soils for farming, diverse habitats for wildlife, and numerous water resources. The historical photos show the original Hanson farmstead, thresher and saw rig for cutting lumber. The land is permanently protected from subdivision and mining.



Ben Logan



Aldo Leopold

# People Who've Inspired Us To Conserve This Place

BY DAVE SKOLODA AND  
KELLY SULTZBACH

**“WHEN WE SEE LAND AS A COMMUNITY TO WHICH WE BELONG, WE MAY BEGIN TO USE IT WITH LOVE AND RESPECT.”**

That quotation from Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” essay was included in the first brochure prepared by Mississippi Valley Conservancy to introduce its land conservation mission to the public. In so doing, the young organization sank its roots into the rich culture of land conservation in Wisconsin that Leopold, the state’s pioneering ecologist, had fostered.

Wisconsin’s conservation governor, Gaylord Nelson, who later founded Earth Day, was influenced by

Leopold’s writing, citing it in his push to overhaul the state’s natural resource programs some six decades ago. He earmarked \$50 million for an Outdoor Recreation Action Program (ORAP) to acquire land to be converted into public parks and wilderness areas. Republican Warren Knowles, another conservation-minded governor, who followed Nelson, a Democrat, in the ’60s, backed efforts to reduce water pollution and boosted ORAP funding to increase the acquisition of land for conservation purposes. In 1989,

after the Wisconsin Legislature decided in a bipartisan vote to continue funding land conservation, the program was named to honor two governors: the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program (KNSP), which has supported the Conservancy’s work for 25 years.

Nelson recruited to Wisconsin a renowned landscape architect, Philip H. Lewis Jr. In a 1981 interview published in the *Ocooch Mountain News* (published from 1974 to 1981 in the Driftless Area), Lewis cited his vision of the Driftless Area

as the potential “Central Park” for a population of some 15 million in the “Circle City” that surrounds it. Lewis advised area residents to determine what was worth saving and protect it from the development that was sure to come. He was hired to make such inventories of the state’s natural resources and help planners prioritize land purchases, and he was the architect of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway, which remains a key feature of the Driftless landscape and one of the Conservancy’s priority areas. Lewis, who died in 2017, brought his planning advice to the Conservancy’s second annual meeting in 1999.

In the same issue of the *Ocooch Mountain News*, Ben Logan described his work on a new book *The Land Remembers*, in which he told how the land speaks to us: “Father’s calendar was the land itself...I walked with him sometimes, feeling and smelling the soil in imitation of him. There is still a certain feel and smell of warming land that says seedtime to me.”



## SUGGESTED LITERARY WORKS ON NATURE

For more inspiration regarding our natural world, the following selections are recommended by Kelly Sultzbach, director of the UW-La Crosse Environmental Studies Program

- *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, edited by Johnson & Wilkinson
- *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille T. Dungy
- *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* by Rebecca Solnit paired with:
- *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* by Florence Williams
- *Entanglement* by Vandana Singh
- *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*

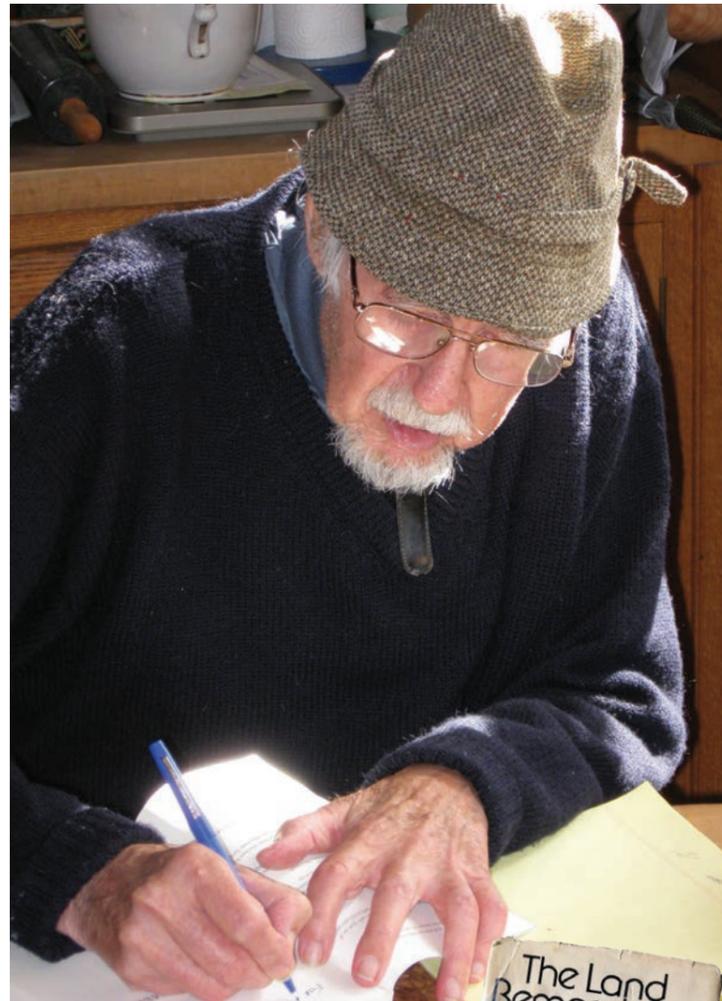
The land speaks to us, though money talks as well. So it has been inspiring to see how the Conservancy has grown from nothing to a professional staff of 10 and net worth of \$22 million, with nearly 24,000 acres of land protected. The Conservancy started with a few dollars donated by its founders, some modest checks from supportive organizations, and advice and support from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, the Conservation Fund and the Blufflands Alliance. Then came major investments from a local industrialist, the McKnight Foundation, the Paul E. Stry Foundation, the Knowles–Nelson Stewardship Program, as well as donations from an anonymous philanthropist, donations of land, bequests and donations from a host of donors at whatever level they could afford—all believing in the need for land conservation. As a former Conservancy board president writes after his signature in every email, “It is amazing what can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit.”

In 2003, Ben Logan, too, came to talk with Conservancy members. Before he died in 2014, he placed the farm he wrote about, Seldom Seen Farm, in a conservation easement with the Conservancy, adding his name to the growing list of land owners who, along with the support of generous donors, have written an important—yes, inspiring—chapter in the story of land conservation in Wisconsin.

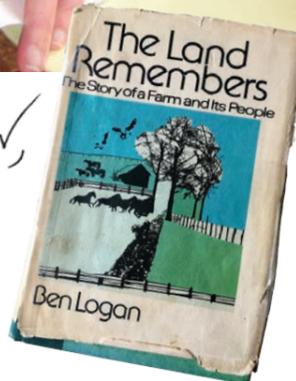
Ben would say the land has spoken to us... and continues to beckon for the respect Leopold envisioned in his “Land Ethic.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dave Skoloda** and **Kelly Sultzbach** serve on the Conservancy’s communications committee where their combined journalistic and literary expertise help engage the community with our conservation cause.



FOR DAVE + GRETCHEN,  
MAY THE LAND  
ALWAYS SPEAK TO  
YOU. GOOD SEEING  
YOU AGAIN.  
Ben Logan  
Nov. 3, 2000



“I LOVE HIKING WITH MY GRANDKIDS ON MANY OF THE CONSERVED LANDS OF THE COULEE REGION AND ACROSS THE MIDWEST.”

## A GRANDMOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

BY SANDRA MCANANY

I remember being young, going to state parks with my grandparents, and thinking that the beautiful natural world and Wisconsin would always be there for me. Now, decades later, I am the grandmother taking grandkids out in nature, and I’ve realized, over time, that land conservation is critical not only for now but also for future generations. New houses have sprung up everywhere, and it’s essential to save the natural places around them before they are gone.

I love hiking with my grandkids on many of the conserved lands of the Coulee Region and across the Midwest. The land and water conservation movement has given us the opportunity to learn more, together, about the trees, wildlife, birds and insects. And most important, I can pass down the joy of being in nature to my children and their children.

As a grandmother, I also know that the land we have today must not be taken for granted. Over the last 50 years, Wisconsin has become warmer, which seems to be increasing the frequency of floods and droughts. Wetlands have been drained and filled to build, which has altered watersheds. As development expands in

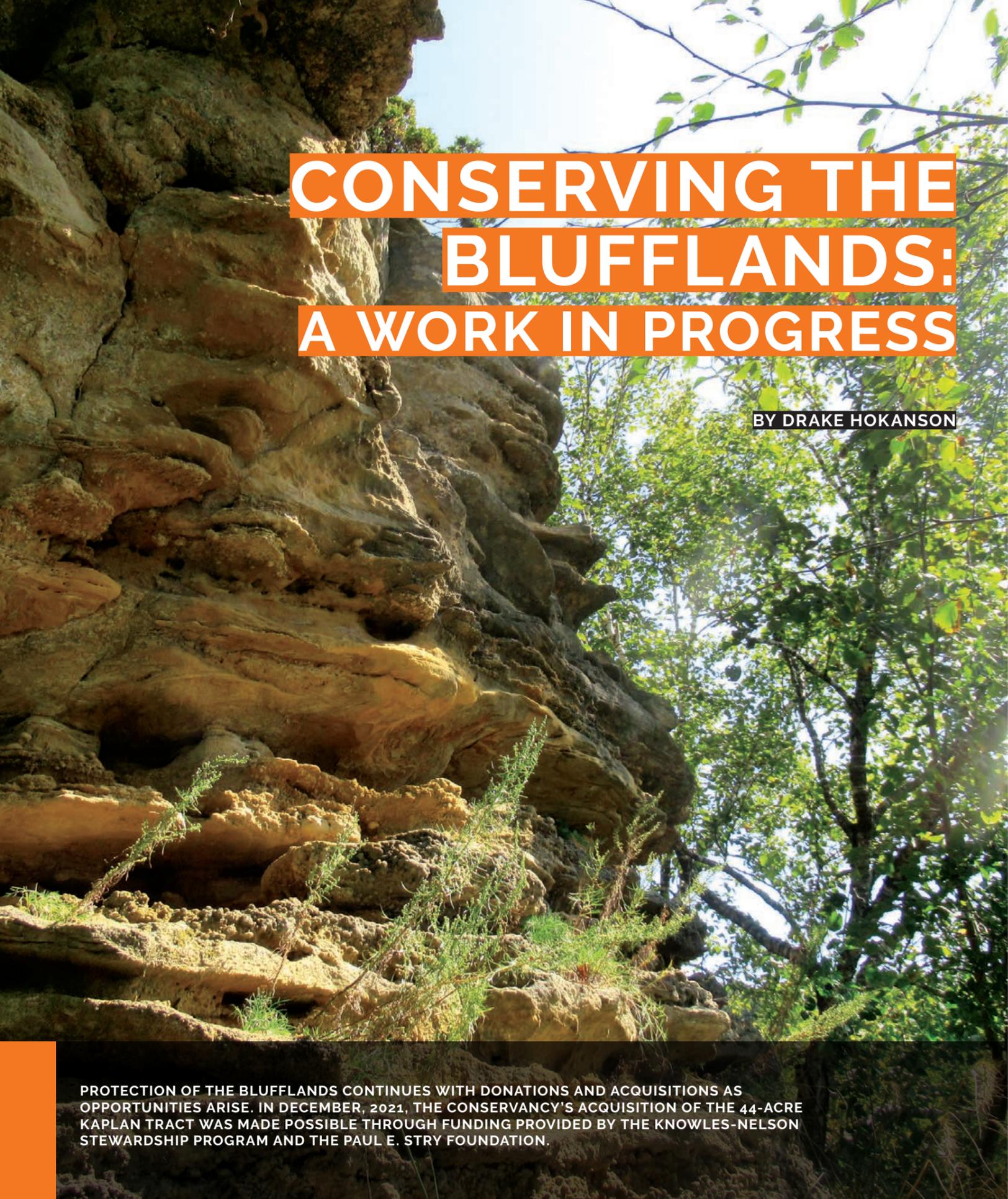
Wisconsin, solid surfaces such as roads and buildings are causing water to move faster and temperatures to rise. Surely we can develop in smarter ways and protect natural places at the same time.

When Wisconsin land is conserved, it makes a difference not only for us but for future generations. This effort is not only supported by our government and county conservation departments, but also by nonprofit conservation organizations such as land trusts and friends groups. In our area, my grandkids have been able to hike on many trails owned and maintained by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy and their partners. We want to say a huge thank you to the Conservancy’s members, volunteers, partners and staff for making a difference in our region, now and forever.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sandra McAnany** looks out her window at a wooded bluff that’s protected by the Conservancy. She generously volunteers her time and talent creating beautiful photography that helps us tell our story.





# CONSERVING THE BLUFFLANDS: A WORK IN PROGRESS

BY DRAKE HOKANSON

The scenic bluffs that preside above La Crosse and the region have long been enjoyed by area residents and visitors, but few know how much effort has gone into protecting them or how the conservation project continues to expand.

In the late 1800s, La Crosse attorney J. W. Losey dreamed of preserving all the blufflands east of La Crosse, north and south, “...to preserve them for all time as parks for the citizens of this and future generations,” according to a contemporary newspaper account. Losey and other residents watched as woodcutting throughout the bluffs and quarrying of Grandad Bluff threatened their destruction.

It was bellwether Ellen Hixon who put up most of the money, and raised the rest, to buy Grandad Bluff, saving it from being quarried out of existence. Along with adjacent lands, Grandad was donated to the City of La Crosse, becoming part of Hixon Forest. With additional donations of land by the Hixon family and others, Hixon Forest grew to some 800 acres.

Since the earliest days of the city, the prominent bluff outcrops, woodlands and relict prairie east of town have been enjoyed by hikers, picnickers, botanists and birdwatchers. Hixon Forest was largely protected, but quarrying and woodcutting continued on adjacent lands. By the mid-twentieth century, city neighborhoods had expanded east to the foot of the bluffs, and housing developments were appearing in “coulees” and on the bluffs.

Beginning in the 1990s, conservation leaders began looking to endangered natural landscapes, including the bluffs, with a mind toward protecting them from development, as well as saving critical habitat and providing greater outdoor recreation opportunities for area residents.

But it wasn’t until Mississippi Valley Conservancy teamed up with the City of La Crosse to create the La Crosse Bluffland Protection Program in 2001 that the movement took off. From 2002 to 2009, the city budgeted money each year with which the Conservancy acquired properties within an eight-mile stretch of Mississippi River bluffs that overlook the city. Funding from the City was leveraged with grants from Wisconsin’s Knowles–Nelson Stewardship Program. As a result of the La Crosse Bluffland Protection Program, in 2006 the City of La Crosse was recognized as “Policymaker of the Year” by Gathering Waters, the alliance of Wisconsin land trusts.

In 2002, the Paul E. Stry Foundation, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and other conservationists teamed up to buy a 12-acre property in the blufflands of La Crosse to prevent its development into a home site. In 2003, the Conservancy protected 18 acres by easement on the Baier tract, purchased 20 acres of the Welch tract and received a six-acre land donation from Barbara and Donald Frank. The Paul E. Stry Foundation funded a detailed study of area blufflands that identified 13 high-priority properties that ought to be purchased and protected as public land.

“We all worked together to give life to the bluffland preservation movement in the La Crosse area,” said Bob Swartz of the Paul E. Stry Foundation board.

“The ‘viewshed’ was the big factor, more than recreation and habitat at the time,” said Pat Caffrey, past president and longtime board member and restoration volunteer at the Conservancy. “People were concerned about a row of houses appearing across the bluffs.” Also of great concern were rare reptiles, birds, wildflowers and relict prairies on the steep hillsides.

PROTECTION OF THE BLUFFLANDS CONTINUES WITH DONATIONS AND ACQUISITIONS AS OPPORTUNITIES ARISE. IN DECEMBER, 2021, THE CONSERVANCY’S ACQUISITION OF THE 44-ACRE KAPLAN TRACT WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE KNOWLES-NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM AND THE PAUL E. STRY FOUNDATION.

In all, including purchases, land donations and easements, the La Crosse Bluffland Protection Program protected nearly 1,000 acres of the blufflands, including the former Mathy quarry site. A similar program with the Conservancy and the City of Onalaska added more protected bluffland acreage. The Onalaska program with the Conservancy continues, with conserved lands being transferred to the city and more funding and projects in the works, according to Abbie Church, MVC conservation director. The most recent bluffland project in Onalaska involved the donation of 50 acres in December 2021.

Another breakthrough in regional cooperation came in 2016 with the completion of a comprehensive plan for conservation and recreation in the blufflands (including those across the Mississippi) sponsored by La Crosse County with input from many stakeholders. This plan triggered the establishment of the Blufflands Coalition, a partnership among public bluffland property owners and key land trust and recreation groups. The focus has been to accumulate not only scenic and environmentally significant land, but also to connect contiguous parcels for optimum habitat benefit. As conservationists say, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In addition, private owners of blufflands, after seeing the success of public lands projects, have been signing up to convey easements on their own land to protect it permanently for habitat and from development. Others have begun to include their land in bequests.

In addition to the major players in the work of bluffland protection, hundreds of volunteers and organizations as diverse as Gundersen Health System, Mayo Clinic Health System, WisCorps, Friends of the Blufflands, Viterbo Service Saturdays, Rotary After Hours and The Prairie Enthusiasts, plus private

landowners who have either donated land or conveyed conservation easements, have all contributed to the protection and restoration of this critical landscape that shapes the Mississippi River Valley.

“These blufflands are an important part of La Crosse,” says Pat Wilson, a founding board member of the Conservancy and current president of Friends of the Blufflands. “There is a lot of recreational opportunity, a lot of beauty, and they’re saved from development so far.”



Looking back, Gretchen Pfeiffer, a founding board member of the Conservancy and large-river specialist for The Nature Conservancy, talks about cooperation. “I look at it as a convergence of different conservation efforts,” she said. “We were working separately, but then worked together.”

“It’s pretty profound,” she added. “Keeping the forest, the natural beauty, the recreational opportunities—they are all important to people.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Drake Hokanson**, an organic, independent and free-range scholar serves on the Conservancy’s volunteer board of directors. Among his many gifts to the land trust are photography, writing and aerial land monitoring with his copilot and wife, Carol Kratz.



Photo by Sandra McAnany

**FOLLOWING LAND ACQUISITION AND LEGAL PROTECTION, RESTORATION OF NATIVE HABITATS IN THE LA CROSSE BLUFFLANDS HAS BEEN A MAJOR FOCUS OF THE FRIENDS OF THE BLUFFLANDS, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY AND THE CITY OF LA CROSSE PARKS, RECREATION & FORESTRY DEPARTMENT. THIS WORK IS ONGOING AND INCLUDES SUCH ACTIVITIES AS INVASIVE SPECIES REMOVAL, PRAIRIE RECONSTRUCTION AND RESTORATION, TRAIL IMPROVEMENTS AND INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE.**

◀ Inset photo of previous page: On a late fall day in 2021, these dedicated conservationists met in the La Crosse blufflands to celebrate an award bestowed upon the Paul E. Stry Foundation for its funding of several key acquisitions in the conservation of La Crosse’s iconic landscape. Each of them has provided leadership in the region’s conservation movement since before the founding of Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 1997, and they all continue to do so today. From left to right, Gretchen Pfeiffer (Mississippi Valley Conservancy board vice president), Bob Swartz (Paul E. Stry Foundation board member), Maureen Kinney (Mississippi Valley Conservancy board member), Craig Thompson (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources). Pfeiffer, Thompson and Kinney were among the founding members of the Conservancy.

# RESTORING THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE

BY JOHN LYONS



**M**ississippi River bluffs are among the most scenic and biologically diverse landscapes in the Midwest, and Mississippi Valley Conservancy's Devil's Backbone State Natural Area in Grant County, Wisconsin, is a particularly beautiful and important example. To my mind, Chase Creek, which flows through a steep, brushy valley down to the Mississippi, is the jewel of the property. It's a very pretty stream full of gorgeous brook trout, and at first glance it looks like it hasn't changed since time immemorial. But closer examination reveals that it's a system in recovery, and the forested lands that the Conservancy protects along its banks and in its watershed have been essential in restoring it to good health.

The Mississippi River corridor was one of the first areas settled by Europeans when they began moving into what is now Wisconsin in the early 1800s. Although lead mining was the initial draw, agriculture soon dominated the region. Farming methods of the

time were hard on the land. Prairies and savannas were plowed with little regard for soil conservation. Wetlands were ditched and drained. Forests were cut for timber and burned to open up more land for crops and livestock. The thick, deeply rooted vegetation that had held the rich, finely textured soils of the region in place for millennia was lost, and the resulting erosion was massive.

Valleys such as the one Chase Creek flows through were filled with up to six feet of sediment. Rainfall then drained quickly off the steep slopes rather than soaking into the ground, causing destructive floods and leading many springs to dry up. Streams were choked with eroded soils and gravels and became wide and shallow with little fish habitat. With no shade from the summer sun and with many fewer springs, the water became too warm for the native brook trout. By the early 1900s, the land and waters of the Mississippi River bluffs had been heavily degraded.

Fortunately, all was not lost at Devil's Backbone. Many areas of the valley were too steep and rocky for plowing or even grazing, and some of the forest remained intact. A century of erosion and constant cropping had depleted the soils, and this led to farming being abandoned. Slowly, the forests began to recover and expand. As vegetation cover increased, erosion slowed, floods gradually diminished and springs began to reappear. Perennial grasses, shrubs and small trees became established on the banks of Chase Creek, partially stabilizing them and providing some shade to the stream. The water temperature slowly became colder and by the later 1900s was once again suitable for trout. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources reintroduced brook trout in the early 2000s and they became established. Since 2021, the stream has begun to resemble its former pre-settlement self, although it is still too wide and shallow in some areas and eroding banks remain a problem. Complete recovery of Chase Creek will take decades more.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is working to ensure that Chase Creek will have those decades to recover. In 2007 and again in 2010, the Conservancy acquired land for preservation in the valley along the creek and in the surrounding bluffs. These two parcels were declared a Wisconsin State Natural Area in 2011, providing further protection. In 2021, the Conservancy obtained additional forested land in the bluffs. Keeping healthy forests in the valley is essential to allow precipitation to soak into the soil and feed the many springs that keep Chase Creek cold—a critical step to help offset the threat of a warming climate.

Brook trout fishing in Chase Creek is challenging but worth the effort if you like to “earn” the fish you catch. Access is tough, and there are no roads or trails and many brushy and prickly thickets to bushwhack through to reach the water. The best habitats in the

stream are full of downed trees and overhanging branches, making careful and precise casts a must. Even then, it's a given that you will lose lots of terminal tackle to snags. But the trout are there and will reward the angler who perseveres. The Devil's Backbone is well worth a visit. 🐟



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John Lyons** is Curator of Fishes at the University of Wisconsin Zoological Museum. He's an avid angler and a sustaining member of Mississippi Valley Conservancy.



Photos by John Lyons

# CONSERVATION FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

BY FRED KOERSCHNER



Until recently, my wife, Lou Anne, and I lived in the Twin Cities. As our children moved away from home and we retired from our jobs, our lives changed. Two of our children, their spouses, and our two grandsons are now in Madison. In 2020 we moved to Madison to be closer to family.

Sarah, our Madison daughter, and her husband, Forrest, have always enjoyed the Driftless Area of Wisconsin and had a dream to own a second property there and experience it with their two young sons. Lou Anne and I started exploring the Driftless too. We were amazed at the beauty of an area we had known so little about. The couples decided to look together for the right place.



We wanted a property with natural beauty that we could preserve for the future, and we decided to check with Mississippi Valley Conservancy for ideas. One of the properties listed on their website was a diverse mix of forest, prairie and farmland overlooking the river valley near Readstown. This was the place for us. The previous owners had worked with the Conservancy to place the land in a conservation easement and did a wonderful job adding hiking trails and native wildflower fields and working with local farmer James Weber to plant alfalfa in the property's agricultural zone.

Why do we love this property? Besides being close to the many opportunities in the Driftless Area for hiking,

paddling and exploring, we now have our own beautiful natural area to explore, preserve and enhance with family and friends. It is a wonderful learning experience for our three-generation family group. We are learning from James about the organic farming process and his work to improve soil quality by reversing the effects of previous chemical fertilization and his use of low-till practices to reduce erosion.



We are learning from the Conservancy about best practices for forest and prairie management. Our young grandsons are experiencing nature firsthand by exploring the property's fields and forests. This past summer, they regularly checked in on a cocoon they discovered until the day a luna moth emerged. And they are becoming quite the experts. 🦋

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Fred Koerschner** is a retired engineer and business manager. He has 20 years of Wisconsin land trust experience and enjoys hiking, paddling, bicycling and skiing.



Photos by Fred Koerschner



# What I Learned From Women Caring for the Land

BY KELLY SULTZBACH

When poet William Carlos Williams published “The farmer in deep thought” in 1923, the masculine speaker surveys his open fields as “the artist figure of the farmer—composing—antagonist,” describing a solitary effort, epitomized by an adversarial relationship with nature. Women Caring for the Land is taking a different approach. According to Women Caring for the Land, women now own or co-own close to fifty percent of the farmland in the U.S, suggesting that women, who have historically not had as much control over how property is used

as men, are increasingly making land management decisions. The way those decisions are made is changing too. On a breezy Saturday in early September, a group of nineteen women gathered at the Weigandt farm—some just beginning to design a new purpose for their land, others coming with lessons gleaned from decades of nurturing stewardship. Britta Petersen, a farm bill biologist from Pheasants Forever, organized this Women Caring for the Land event, a model based on networking and community-building pioneered by the Women’s Food and Agricultural

Network. She brought experts from Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), University of Wisconsin Extension, Ducks Unlimited, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forestry and Mississippi Valley Conservancy’s own conservation director, Abbie Church. The day began with sipping morning coffee around a circle of chairs set up in the Weigandts’ ample workshop, which features a panoramic view of their four-decades-long conservation project as inspiration. This session was focused on forest conservation but lots of other issues made their way

into the circle as well. Participants took turns sharing stories and posing questions. Here are a few snippets of the conversation:

- A former nurse who now nurtures 17 raised beds to grow what her family eats talks about the unforeseen costs of creating road access for timber sales.
- A pair of women who own 70 acres of walnut trees want to do agroforestry for carbon-sequestering and learn how to grow mushrooms and plants with medicinal properties.
- After sharing her love for the song of the western meadowlark and involvement with bird surveys, a woman confesses to having planted autumn olive in the late 1970s (a species once thought to promote erosion control and offer wildlife habitat but now known to disrupt native ecosystems). There is an audible intake of breath from the circle. She briefly covers her face but then reminds us that one is always learning.
- A woman who restored a log home and dairy barn with her husband talks about trying to create balance by restoring prairie without using fire or chemicals but still needing spot-chemical treatment for timber stand improvement.
- Several mention being close to an age where they are thinking more about what comes next for the land and what future owners might do, prompting a series of questions for the Conservancy’s Abbie Church about how conservation easements work.

After lunch, Susan Weigandt led a tour of her and her husband’s farm, now a stunning canvas

of multipurpose conservation. We ambled out to a rock-lined pond and marveled at the number of frogs leaping into the water at our approach. A graceful curve of trail guided us through lush sedge meadow providing habitat for bobolinks and green snakes. Above us, cattle roamed the hillside as women discussed rotational grazing, riprap and water protection. We stopped under a tall canopy of oak forest where conversation turned to contrasts between forestry policies based on tree competition and new tree science about cooperative roots and fungi networks. No matter what the subject, an abiding love of place and a desire to learn from one another was the unifying theme.

What I learned at Women Caring for the Land is that unlike the solitary, embattled hero of Williams’s poem, these women are learning that long-term design can be a more collaborative process for conservationist land owners, both with each other and with nature. Some seasons are spent pushing back against antagonist invasives, yet others are devoted to sharing experiences of how to heal the land—trying to listen to what the environment might need from us. The resulting landscape is an artwork composed with shared tools, bringing together the collective energy of human labor and nature’s ecological desire. 🍄

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kelly Sultzbach** is director of the UW-La Crosse Environmental Studies Program, where she teaches Environmental Literature. Her students have written book reviews, led discussion groups and offered outdoor readings on behalf of the Conservancy.



Photos by Abbie Church



To find out more about Women Caring for the Land and how to attend future events, visit [wfan.org/women-caring-for-the-land](http://wfan.org/women-caring-for-the-land) or get in touch with Britta Petersen at Pheasants Forever in Richland Center, Wisconsin: [bpetersen@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:bpetersen@pheasantsforever.org)



# BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF PROTECTED LANDS

BY DRAKE HOKANSON

**M**ississippi Valley Conservancy has developed a novel approach to monitoring conservation easements on protected lands—by using small aircraft. Two Conservancy board members and a volunteer pilot own single-engine airplanes, and they have developed practices that save considerable staff time and fuel.

Yearly monitoring is required for each of the 192 properties on which the Conservancy holds an easement agreement. Staff and volunteer monitors—on the ground or from the air—examine each parcel to see that no one has built a road in a conservation zone or done

an unsustainable timber harvest, for example. Traditionally, easement monitors walk the perimeter of the land, taking notes and photographs, sometimes accompanied by landowners, who are often eager to show off their land and conservation work. The lands in the Conservancy's nine-county region are spread out, often steep and wooded, and sometimes large, meaning that a monitoring visit to a single parcel can require a long drive and take a half a day.

### Enter the airplane.

"You can cover a lot more ground with an airplane," said Mike Ripp, volunteer pilot and Conservancy board member who flies a Cessna 150 out of Prairie du Chien. "This year we had eight properties to monitor and did it in two and a half hours in the air."

With a small aircraft flying straight lines cross-country, the fuel savings are considerable compared to miles and miles driving on the ground.



VOLUNTEER PILOT CAROL KRATZ PREFLIGHTS HER CESSNA 172 PRIOR TO DEPARTING THE LA CROSSE AIRPORT FOR A ROUND OF AERIAL EASEMENT MONITORING.

My wife Carol Kratz, and I, are both pilots and own a Cessna 172. For most monitoring flights, she flies and I locate the properties and take the photographs. On the ground before a flight, I plot the land parcels into our navigation system, and once airborne, the flight becomes a game of connect the dots. Two turns above each property provide ample photographic coverage. Last year we monitored 14 properties in two flights.

"There are great advantages to aerial monitoring," according to volunteer pilot Kratz. "It allows for a more comprehensive view, and photos taken from the air can be carefully examined by staff to ensure compliance. The downside is you don't get to meet the landowner or hike the property."

Why not a drone? They will have a role in land monitoring as soon as the Conservancy gets one, but their range is limited, and you still have to drive to the land that is to be monitored.

Small aircraft, drones and traditional on-the-ground monitoring each have their advantages. From the ground, monitors can better detect the presence of invasive species. From the air, monitors can see into dense forest and can get a clear overall view of a property.

"For those of us who like to fly, it's a good excuse and a good way to donate to the Conservancy," said Ripp. 🐦

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Drake Hokanson**, an organic, independent and free-range scholar, serves on the Conservancy's volunteer board of directors. Among his many gifts to the land trust are photography, writing and aerial land monitoring with his copilot and wife, Carol Kratz.



# Thanking You *For the Wild*

Each year, hundreds of people help protect land, water and climate as volunteers *For the Wild*. It takes a lot of teamwork to conserve Wisconsin's Driftless Area, and we are ever grateful for the many individuals who donate their time and talents to make it happen. There are far too many volunteers to name, but the pictures on these two pages give an idea of just how many ways they help protect the landscapes and communities that make this place so special.

We invite you to join our *For the Wild* team in whatever way you can. Bring your camera, your chainsaw, your recipes, your guitar or whatever talents you'd like to share with the ever-expanding circle of volunteers who are fueling our mission forward into the next twenty-five years. 🐦



VISIT THE VOLUNTEER PAGE ON OUR WEBSITE AND TELL US HOW YOU'D LIKE TO HELP.



# THE CHALLENGE IS FUN FOR EVERYONE

**W**hen it's time for your kiddos to burn some excess energy, or time for you to refresh your mind and spirit, the Trail Trek Challenge offers great options for walking trails throughout the year in the beauty of the diverse nature preserves protected by the Conservancy for you and everyone.

The fifteen trails included in the free hike/walk challenge range from popular destinations in and around La Crosse to lesser known natural wonders in surrounding counties. Maps and hike descriptions are available to participants upon registration. Participants also receive monthly updates about recommended hikes, trail conditions and fun things to do along the way.

To further engage budding nature lovers, a nature challenge is available for each of the trails in the program with *Find Nature's Treasures*.

Trail Trek Challenge began as a one-day team event in 2017. By popular demand, the Challenge was transformed into a year-round program that allows people to hike when and where they want to. By completing at least five of the fifteen walks and sending in their hike log, participants become eligible for a prize drawing at the end of the year-long challenge.

It's never too late to sign up! Details and registration for the Trail Trek Challenge are available at [mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc](https://mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc).

For hikers of all sorts, the Trail Trek Challenge offers discovery, fun and all the health benefits of getting outdoors on nature preserves in five counties.



Photos by Tom Rhorer



Photo by Vendi



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

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved 23,929 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams and farmlands in and around the Mississippi, Kickapoo and Wisconsin Rivers since its founding in 1997. Over 7,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography and snowshoeing.

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

WORKING ALONGSIDE PRIVATE LANDOWNERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES ON VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION PROJECTS, WE HAVE PERMANENTLY CONSERVED NEARLY 24,000 ACRES OF BLUFFLANDS, PRAIRIES, WETLANDS, FARMLANDS AND STREAMS SINCE OUR FOUNDING IN 1997.

BUFFALO

TREMPEALEAU

JACKSON

LA CROSSE

MONROE

VERNON

RICHLAND

CRAWFORD

GRANT

# 6 Steps to Forever Land

Forming a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy

1

## SITE VISIT

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

2

## APPROVAL

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

3

## MAKING A PLAN

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

4

## DRAFT EASEMENT

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

5

## DOCUMENTATION

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

6

## PERMANENCE

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

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

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



"I LIKED THE IDEA OF ENSURING THAT THE LAND WILL STAY AS IT IS, FOREVER, AND KNOWING THAT AN ORGANIZATION LIKE YOURS [MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY] IS IN PLACE TO MAKE SURE THAT HAPPENS."

- DIANNE GREENLEY, 2013  
GRANT COUNTY LANDOWNER WITH A CONSERVATION EASEMENT

# The next 25 years depend on you!

The urgency to protect more land, habitat, biodiversity and clean water has never been greater than it is today. You have an amazing opportunity to expand the protection, care and restoration of our unique and beautiful Driftless Area for the benefit of everyone. With the help of longtime conservation partners like you, nearly 24,000 acres of prairies, forests, wetlands, streams and farmlands are protected for birds, bees, turtles, fish and future generations.

But this isn't enough.

To prevent loss of land that our furry and feathered friends depend upon, and to tackle the effects of climate change that threaten farms and communities, together we must protect more land. And we must care for that land in ways that build its resilience for the plants, animals and people that depend upon it to survive and thrive.

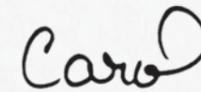
To help ensure a healthy future for generations to come, I invite you to join our *Stewardship Circle*.

The *Stewardship Circle* consists of a very special group of land conservation supporters who've made a lasting promise to the land through a number of estate-planning tools, including gifts in a will or trust, charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, IRA designations or gifts of life insurance or land.

Right now, you can increase your gift and pledge to support land protection in the Driftless Area for today and tomorrow through the *Stewardship Circle*.

Your gift means the world to all of us.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon,  
Executive Director



Photo by Vendi

## JOIN THE STEWARDSHIP CIRCLE

To learn more about how you can join this special group of conservation supporters, please contact Carol Abrahamzon at 608-784-3606 x4 or [carol@mississippivalleyconservancy.org](mailto:carol@mississippivalleyconservancy.org) or visit our website [mississippivalleyconservancy.org](http://mississippivalleyconservancy.org) and click the Ways to Give tab to learn about options to leave a lasting gift for protection of land and water.




**Join us in this movement and become a steward of the environment: give us a call, send us an email, visit our website or scan the QR code below to learn more and find volunteer opportunities on our land at St. Joseph Ridge, just outside of La Crosse, Wisconsin.**

**“ We need a new ecological approach that can transform our way of dwelling in the world ... our relationship with the resources of the Earth ... our way of looking at humanity and living life. ”**

**~ Pope Francis**

**Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration**  
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**WE HAVE NOT  
INHERITED THE  
EARTH FROM OUR  
PARENTS, WE  
HAVE BORROWED  
IT FROM OUR  
CHILDREN.**

**WENDELL BERRY**

Photo by Vendi

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