



## *Conservancy Notes*

FALL 2026

# Protecting what matters: One Monroe County family's conservation journey

*By Karen Solverson*

**I**t started with a spontaneous turn down a quiet country road—and a knock on a stranger's door that would shape the future of 118 acres for generations.

In 1980, Rick and Susan Case were young teachers dreaming of a little piece of heaven where they would have room to raise a family and a small herd of cattle. Although there was not a "for sale" sign, Rick randomly turned onto a road leading into a scenic valley and pulled up to the house. Susan looked at Rick with confusion, but after searching all over the area for land without luck, Rick said to just give him a minute.

He knocked on the door, and when the homeowner

came out, he asked her if they would ever consider selling. She looked back into the house, perplexed, looked at Rick even more perplexed, and invited him in. It turned out that the woman's husband was sitting at the table with the phone book open to the real estate section of the yellow pages. A math whiz, Susan started running numbers, they negotiated a price, bought the land and have been tending to it with care ever since.

They were attracted to the land because it was south facing, included 0.25 miles of a tributary of Brush Creek, had fields for crops, great potential for deer

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*Rick and Susan Case enjoy a scenic walk through their property.  
(Contributed photo)*

# Have you thought about leaving a land legacy?

## A message from Carol

This summer, as I spent time on the farm, walking familiar trails, tending the garden, and keeping up with the everyday rhythm of chores—I found myself pausing more often than usual. I checked on the bur oak trees I planted a few years ago, now steadily reaching toward the sky. I moved through the pastures, noticing what was thriving, what needed care, and what was quietly flourishing in synchronization with the rotation of the cows and calves.

In those moments, I began to think about what kind of land legacy I am leaving for my children and my grandchildren.

A legacy is shaped in the quiet work of stewardship, the tending of soil, water, forest, and prairie. It is found in the return of wildflowers to a hillside, in the steady presence of oak saplings that will outlast us, in the songs of birds moving through restored habitat.

You do not need to own land to leave a land legacy. When you support this work—protecting family farms, restoring prairies alive with bees and butterflies, and safeguarding forests, waters, and wildlife, you are helping create something enduring.

It makes me proud and grateful to know that the actions we take today will continue shaping the world our children and grandchildren will inherit. Forests will still stand, prairies will still bloom, and working lands will remain cared for.

It makes me proud. It makes me grateful. And it fills my heart to know we are doing this work together. Thank you for being part of leaving a land legacy.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon  
Executive Director



*On a brisk spring day, a family explores the sights and sounds of Sugar Creek Bluff, a 440-acre property protected forever because of the support of members like YOU who have made moments like this possible for generations to come. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*



**Case... (continued from cover)**

hunting, and space for their cattle. Susan was raised on a dairy farm, and Rick had run a beef operation, so they knew they wanted room to raise 25-40 head of cattle. The pasture space was limited, but “you don’t need more acres if you rotationally graze the property,”

knew that their first priority was to work with someone to identify the conservation issues and potential solutions. As the ag teacher at Brookwood High School (later called Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton High School), Rick spent a lot of time teaching conservation practices to his students, but he didn’t just teach the principles—he lived

he helped the Cases make a plan for how to reroute the water. Together, they developed a plan and were able to obtain cost-share assistance for flood abatement.

An earthen dam was built. A diversion project was the first step, diverting as much clean water away from the dry lot as possible. The diversion was just



*Rick and Susan have spent decades building the quality of their beef operation and enhancing the land that nourishes the cattle and their family. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*

Rick explained. “We knew from the start that we wanted to rotationally graze to increase the carrying capacity of the land.” Nearly half of their land, where they raise and sell Angus cattle, is now rotationally grazed and cut for hay.

Located just west of the Kickapoo River, their property is part of the watershed that feeds the river. Rick shared, “When we first bought the property, it was a conservation nightmare. A tributary of the creek used to run right through the barnyard, which was in the valley.” Knowing all of the problems this could create, they

them, too. implementing practices that were good for the land and wildlife long term. Their daughter, Julie, a state FFA officer upon graduating from high school, went on to become a farmer as well, implementing lessons learned from her time on the farm, in the classroom, and in FFA.

After researching their options, Rick and Susan reached out to Bob Micheel at the Monroe County Land Conservation Department. New to his position with the county all those years ago, Bob came out and took a look at the property, and

the beginning. Rick knew that it was a problem to have so much manure in a valley near the creek, so Bob returned and they developed a manure management plan and found cost-share assistance to build a covered manure storage facility.

For years, Rick, Susan, and Bob worked together on a variety of projects to protect and enhance the land, and as the land changed, so did Bob’s title, eventually becoming the Monroe County Land Conservation Department

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**Case... (continued from pg.3)**

Director. One day after Rick and Susan had called Bob to come over to assess what had been completed and look to the future, Bob stood at the top of the ridge, looked over the valley and told Rick, “We have pretty much used all of the tools in my tool box, and I just don’t think there is another thing we could possibly do to improve this property.”

Although there weren’t any new conservation projects to tackle, after decades of working to protect this special property, Rick and Susan knew they wanted to be sure the land was protected forever, and they reached out to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy for help. Several staff members of the Conservancy walked the land and were amazed to discover seven distinct ecosystems.

Over time, Susan and Rick learned more about each unique area on their farm, including a

vulnerable sedge meadow that had been protected because they had fenced it off to keep the cattle from trampling it. Once widely spread around Wisconsin, sedge meadows are now rare, as they have largely been drained or removed for housing development or agricultural use. However, they have great value in flood water storage and wildlife habitat.

Stewardship Specialist Connor Kotte identified more than 50 species of breeding birds on just one visit to the property in early July last year. As he hiked alongside Rick through the rolling hayfields, across the trickling wetlands, and over the wooded bluffs, Connor was astounded by the amazing diversity of birds that the 118 acres support.

Connor and Rick spotted Savannah sparrows, eastern kingbirds, and American goldfinches utilizing the hayfields. They enjoyed watching common yellowthroats, gray catbirds, and

indigo buntings catch insects around the wetlands, and red-headed woodpeckers (a species of special concern in Wisconsin) targeting deadfall for insects along the edge of the pasture.

Throughout the woodlands, they listened to singing interior forest birds such as American redstart, red-eyed vireo, scarlet tanager, ovenbird, yellow-billed cuckoo, and many others. A portion of the property is located within the Kickapoo Valley Reserve-Wildcat Mountain Important Bird Area, a stretch of land from Ontario to La Farge that contains the most intact forests in the entire Driftless Area. Rick and Susan’s property, and their decision to protect it with a conservation easement, is one more important piece that fits into the larger puzzle of bird conservation in Wisconsin.

The forested ridgelines are an important path for migratory birds and are actively managed through the Cases’ Wisconsin Managed Forestry Law program contract and management plan, including regular timber harvests, forest improvement activities, and trail maintenance. These management plans have enhanced this wildlife sanctuary over time with an emphasis on supporting hickory, cherry, red oak, and white oak. All of these conservation activities also support Rick’s passion: management of white-tailed deer habitat. For years, Rick has hunted with recurve bows, and has decades of stories of memorable hunts with friends and family on this land.

As they laid out plans to set up a conservation easement, Rick

*View from a ridgeline overlook with the farm buildings in the valley. (Photo by Chris Kirkpatrick)*



and Susan worked with the Conservancy team to identify the most important ways to protect the land over time. Every conservation easement the Conservancy accepts is unique to the specific property and the wishes of the landowner for the future of the land.

Susan and Rick will continue to own and live on the land, and the conservation easement includes an area designated for buildings. Based on the agreement they drafted, agricultural practices on the farm are limited to grazing, hay, or perennial crops—no part of the property may be converted to annual row crops in the future.

“This land is part of the fabric of our being, and this easement is the only way we can control it and protect it from the grave,” Rick shared. The conservation easement was finalized on June 8, 2026, and is recorded at the register of deeds. The restrictions pertain to all future owners of the property. At no point in the future can the land be subdivided, developed, or mined, and forest management activities require an approved management plan.

As Rick and Susan’s research into the history of the land unfolded, they discovered a document showing that in 1873 when a Civil War soldier returned from war, he was given 180 acres for his years of service. And at the bottom of that document was the signature of Ulysses S. Grant.

With this revelation, the Case family became even more connected to the land because of something that happened to their



*Susan and Rick Case's family members love spending time at the farm, and their grandchildren are already experiencing the joy of exploring the natural world. (Contributed photo)*

son Jason. When he was just old enough to help with the hay harvest, the family was up on top of the ridge throwing haybales on a wagon when an A-10 Warthog flew low directly over the farm. Jason looked at the plane and at his parents and told them he was going to fly one of those someday. He held true to his word. Lt. Colonel Jason R. Case (retired) spent his entire career flying A-10 Warthogs for the Air Force, and it all began on a tiny farm in Monroe County.

In recognition of all of the conservation practices implemented over the past four decades, Rick and Susan were awarded the Monroe County Conservation Farmer of the Year award in 2021. “Rick and Susan are not just all talk. They are

a voice for the land, and they do what they believe in. Their land is their greatest résumé,” Bob shared.

“Our hope is that others in the area will see what we have done and join us in protecting the unique land which so many take for granted,” Rick said. “As more and more properties are being converted to small lots with homes, there is less and less land for wildlife. We want our property to be an island of natural space forever.” Susan shared that many who have visited their land have asked them if they understand that they have essentially created a state park in their own backyard.

Nothing could make them more proud.

# A lasting land ethic

## Vernon County couple restores their land and ensures its permanent protection

By Mitchel Block

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*“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”*

— Aldo Leopold

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Every protected property has a story. Some begin with a family’s deep roots on the land. Others begin with a dream of restoring what was once lost. The story of Tom and Gail Novacheck’s 121-acre property in eastern Vernon County has both.

On May 29, 2026, Tom and Gail signed a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, permanently protecting their scenic property of bluffs, wetlands along the West Branch Baraboo River, prairie, and farmland. The easement ensures the land will remain protected from mining, residential development, and subdivision while supporting the Conservancy’s mission of conserving native habitats and farmlands for the health and well-being of current and future generations.

For Tom, the story of this land stretches back generations. A native of the Hillsboro area, his family has long cared for both this property and neighboring land now owned by his sisters. Tom’s great-great-grandparents, the Schmidt family, purchased part of the property in 1873. The family name changed from Schmidt to Novacheck when Tom’s grandmother married, but the family’s connection to the land never changed.

The first generations practiced subsistence farming before Tom’s parents, Ervin and Rosemarie, transitioned the property into a dairy farm and expanded its acreage. “We inherited a love of the land from our prior generations,” Tom says. “Knowing and respecting the land were the lessons passed on, whether it was appreciating the cyclical appearance of wildflowers and birds or adopting soil conservation practices

such as strip cropping and grass waterways.”

Tom and Gail carried that stewardship even further. Beginning in 1997, they started restoring native habitats and converting agricultural fields back to forest and prairie. With patience, determination, and a long-term vision, they planted an astonishing 70,000 to 80,000 trees (see image below).

“Ervin recognized the risk of land degradation and willingly helped with the early years of tree planting, even though we talked about how hard our prior generations had worked to clear the fields in order to provide for their families,” Tom recalls.

Working alongside Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources foresters, they planted rows of conifers and mixed hardwoods, including red and white oak. They also tackled troublesome species such as



prickly ash, autumn olive, honeysuckle, burdock, and sumac while conducting prescribed burns to improve habitat and maintain healthy native plant communities. The land responded.

When the Hillsboro Watershed Project constructed a flood-control dam on the property in 1999, the resulting pond added yet another layer of habitat. Designed to capture runoff from surrounding agricultural lands, it now provides habitat for herons, waterfowl, frogs, and turtles.

As the forests matured and native habitats returned, so did the wildlife. Bald eagles now regularly soar overhead. Owls call through the night. Bobcats and coyotes hunt among thriving populations of rabbits and rodents. Along the West Branch Baraboo River, beavers have returned, building dams and ponds of their own. Each returning species is another sign that decades of thoughtful stewardship are restoring balance to the landscape.

"We came to the idea of a land ethic by figuring out what we wanted," Tom says. "Then you read Aldo Leopold's work and realize the similarities with his land ethic, both of which are consistent with the Conservancy's mission."

Their stewardship has never been about following a prescribed plan. Instead, it has been about knowing their land well enough to make good decisions



*Tom and Gail Novacheck and family gather around one of the first red oak trees planted in the spring of 1997, fondly called the "Grandpa Tree," for Grandpa Ervin. (Contributed photo)*

on its behalf. "It's hard to even say how significant it's been," Tom reflects. "The house once had a clear view of the surrounding agricultural fields in the valley, which are now covered in more than 70,000 trees that we have planted. Our oldest planted oak trees are already 12 to 14 inches across."

Just as importantly, Gail and Tom have shared that land ethic with the next generation. They fondly remember camping on the property with their children and dogs before there was even a house there. Years later, their oldest son was married beside the pond they helped create. Today, their annual tree planting continues as a family tradition.

Walking the property today, it is easy to see that this landscape is not frozen in time. It continues to grow, evolve, and flourish because of decades of care. The conservation easement ensures that Tom and Gail's

extraordinary stewardship will continue far beyond their lifetimes. While they retain ownership and continue caring for the land, its forests, prairies, wetlands, and wildlife will remain protected forever.

Their story is a reminder that conservation rarely begins with a signature. More often, it begins with planting a tree. Restoring a prairie. Removing an invasive shrub. Choosing, day after day and year after year to care for the land.

Thanks to the generosity and vision of landowners like Tom and Gail—and to the members and donors who make Mississippi Valley Conservancy's work possible—that care can become a permanent legacy. Together, we are ensuring that special places like this continue to provide clean water, healthy wildlife habitat, productive farmland, and breathtaking Driftless landscapes for generations to come.

# The quiet life of solitary bees

By Danielle Hudson

**A**fter six years of teaching fifth grade, I took a leap of faith and turned my passion for conserving the Driftless Area into a career. At the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, my curiosity about plant-insect interactions grew into my master's research on the pollination habits of solitary ground-nesting bees, and while searching for high quality remnant prairie research sites, I discovered Holland Sand Prairie and the work of Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

Throughout my studies, I often thought about how little I knew before entering the field. While pollinator conservation is a topic that rightfully receives considerable attention, some of the pollinators most deserving of research and celebrity—solitary ground-nesting bees remain among the least

known and most misunderstood. During outreach events, I have often heard stories about frightening encounters with insects nesting in the ground that are assumed to be these bees, but while solitary ground-nesting bees can sting, they are remarkably gentle and often falsely accused.

I walk away from these conversations with even more passion for teaching others about these incredible critters. Bees as a whole are considered the most effective pollinators because of their purposeful collection of pollen to feed their young and fidelity to one plant species on foraging trips, which can include visits to hundreds of flowers. With more than 90 percent of native bee species being solitary, and over 70 percent nesting underground, solitary ground-nesting bees are the most abundant of these essential pollinators. Instead of living in colonies like honeybees or yellow jacket wasps, each female builds her own nest, gathers pollen to provision it, and lays her eggs without assistance. With

no queen, colony, or large food stores to defend, they are unlikely to sting.

Despite living alone, these bees often build nests in large aggregations. One such site on the UW-La Crosse campus contains hundreds (perhaps thousands) of nests in one of the most popular green spaces. As I swung

my insect net and attracted curious looks, the bees went largely unnoticed while students studied and relaxed in the grass alongside them. Over the course of my research, I have spent hours sitting among them, catching females at Holland Sand Prairie and gently collecting pollen from more than 200 bees. I was stung only a handful of times, and only by those that I was rudely hassling while stealing provisions meant for their young. When this happened, surrounding bees would simply continue on with their work.

There was a purpose for robbing the mother bees of their hard-earned pollen. By identifying the plant species represented in each sample, I was able to connect bee species with the plants they pollinate. Although my results are still being analyzed, early findings show that solitary ground-nesting bees support a remarkable diversity of native plants, including many spring-blooming trees that provide critical food in the early spring months before most wildflowers bloom. Prairie sites like Holland Sand Prairie also appear to offer a greater diversity of floral resources than more urban landscapes, and the importance of protecting these rare sites can't be emphasized enough.

Despite the knowledge I've gained while conducting this research, my questions have only grown. The only certainty is that solitary ground-nesting bees quietly play an essential role in maintaining healthy ecosystems, and they deserve our curiosity and conservation, not our fear.

*Easily missed by most, this simple hole in the ground is the entrance to the home of a harmless solitary native bee. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*





*Quiet observation of bee behavior at Holland Sand Prairie allows Danielle to identify a few key areas for study, and she uses a special net to gently capture and study the native bees. The pollen collected allows Danielle to identify all of the plant species the bee has visited, giving scientists a better understanding of the interconnectedness of native plants and bees. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*



*After collecting pollen from caught bees, Danielle marks them with a nontoxic paint pen to ensure they aren't re-collected. (Photo by Karen Solverson)*



*A male Longhorn Bee (*Melissodes* sp.) nectaring on Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum* sp.). (Photo by Danielle Hudson)*

# Tracking golden eagles across the Driftless landscape

*By Chris Kirkpatrick*

**O**n a cold mid-January morning, I bundled up in my coveralls, winter jacket, stocking hat, and gloves. You would have thought I was going out ice fishing, but I was out to hunt for something much more elusive: golden eagles.

Thanks to the National Eagle Center, citizen scientists have been conducting an annual winter golden eagle count for more than 20 years. I had never seen a golden eagle until I moved to Vernon County in 2012 after a local birder connected me with one of Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts.

As it happens, the area I have been surveying since 2019 is

western Vernon County. This is just one of dozens of count areas that originally focused on the Driftless Area but have expanded into adjacent regions in recent years. The data show that golden eagles are consistently being observed and occur in their highest concentrations in Wisconsin's Driftless Area.

In 2026, six of the eight most active golden eagle routes were in counties that include Mississippi Valley Conservancy's service area. The area I have been surveying includes the Conservancy's Bad Axe River Priority Area, which contains more than a dozen private conservation easement properties and nature preserves. These protected properties provide habitat for a diversity of

wildlife, including golden eagles and rough-legged hawks, both of which are winter migrant raptors in our area.

The great thing about this count is that even though the focus species is the golden eagle, the count collects data on any raptors. It is exciting to spend the morning driving around the Driftless Area, tracking your time, mileage, and bird observations, all of which contribute valuable data for analysis. One of the most enjoyable parts is counting all the red-tailed hawks, American kestrels, and bald eagles that you can observe.

This past year, I also got to observe a northern harrier and a merlin, which were my highlights. Luckily, the count area is very



*A golden eagle soars above a field in search of prey. (Photo by Bruce Bartel)*



*This golden eagle was fitted with an ultra light-weight transmitter in Buffalo County by Abbie Krumie of River Valley Raptors on behalf of the Raptor Resource Project. This multi-year golden eagle research project will help scientists understand the migration patterns of these majestic raptor visitors throughout the Driftless Area. (Photo by Ana Morales)*

large, and with a team of volunteers, we divide it into four routes. For the third year in a row, someone in our count area spotted a golden eagle, making it another exciting highlight for the team.

As I drove my route, I became familiar with the names and locations of the Conservancy's protected properties while finding a diversity of raptor species along several branches of the Bad Axe River. Notably, this year our count area had the second highest number of routes reporting American kestrels and red-tailed hawks, as well as one of only six merlins recorded statewide.

I look forward to the winter golden eagle count each year and plan for it as an annual tradition. It is a wonderful way to spend a

winter morning while contributing to a citizen science effort. To me, it also demonstrates the significance of the Conservancy's protected properties. With more than 27,000 acres conserved over nearly 30 years, the Conservancy has helped protect a connected network of habitats that supports an incredible diversity of wildlife, including wintering golden eagles.

Protecting a variety of ecosystems throughout the nine-county area ensures habitat for a diverse array of species, including winter migrants like golden eagles.

From trout streams to farmland and forests, these landscapes all provide habitat, and the Conservancy's protected properties help ensure those habitats remain protected forever.

## Technology adds more insight

In addition to the citizen science efforts to keep an eye on raptor populations, Conservancy partners at the Raptor Resource Project initiated a multi-year study of wintering golden eagles that visit the Driftless Area.

The placement of light-weight solar powered GPS tracking devices has already revealed where their summer homes are in northern Canada and the Arctic. Continued research may help develop a better understanding of how prey distribution and climate influence their travels.

# Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area

## A vital link to our past and future

*By Sarah Bratnaber*

In all of Wisconsin, there is only one mile of protected Mississippi River frontage with no highway separating the bluffs from the Mississippi River. That mile is where Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area meets the Upper Mississippi River Fish & Wildlife Refuge along the east bank of the river in Wisconsin's Driftless Area.

The 244-acre State Natural Area (SNA) is owned and managed in partnership by Mississippi Valley Conservancy and Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Without the conservation efforts of these partners, the steep, wooded property would likely have been divided into a checkerboard of recreational lots.

As a result of land speculation and development, properties with highly diverse and connected habitats have become increasingly rare. According to Bridget Rathman, Southwest Field Ecologist for the DNR, the biodiversity in this corner of Wisconsin represents many "edge of range" species in an area where prairies intersect with eastern forests. She describes State Natural Areas as "islands of biodiversity" and emphasizes humankind's responsibility to nurture and

connect those islands for the increasingly rare species that have depended upon them for thousands of years.

Cassville Bluffs was designated a State Natural Area in 2002. The property features a rare expanse of undeveloped bluff and sand terrace overlooking the Mississippi River that supports dry prairie, scattered dolomite outcroppings, woodlands, and

that were once farmed have been restored through collaborative efforts of the partnership, reducing habitat fragmentation by planting trees in some areas and tallgrass prairie in others. Historically, those habitats provided the food and resources that supported the Indigenous peoples of the area, as confirmed by archaeologists familiar with the property. The inhabitants who have lived at

Cassville Bluffs for the longest duration are its native plant and animal species.

More than 150 plant species have been observed and recorded on the property. They range from five different oaks to ephemeral spring flowers, including three-birds orchid and amethyst shooting star. Some are listed by the state of Wisconsin as being of special concern or threatened. In 2022,

George Riggins, a trained

volunteer with the DNR's Rare Plant Monitoring Program, and DNR ecologist Bridget Rathman discovered a Maryland senna plant on the property. The species had not been documented in Wisconsin since 1911.

What's so important about all of those plants? Together, they form the diverse native plant communities that supports an intricate food web of insects, fish, mollusks,



*Perched on a branch, this tree frog kept a close eye on the interns as they removed invasives at a recent work party. (Photo by Payton Lott)*

rare chinquapin oak savanna, one of the rarest of savanna types in Wisconsin. A key feature of this natural area is the diversity of its connected habitats—from the uplands above to the river bottoms below—which support a wide variety of species and increase climate resilience when conditions become too extreme in any one habitat.

The portions of the property



*With stunning views of the Mississippi River Valley and a diverse blend of plant and animal communities, Cassville Bluffs provides ample space for both wildlife and people. The photo above shows some of the several thousand native trees that were planted to enhance wildlife habitat several years ago (notice the white tree protectors in lower portion of image). (Photo by Michael Leis)*

amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals—including humans—that has existed here since long before recorded history. Every species plays a role, and the health of each depends on the health of others.

“The health and resilience of many of the species and the disturbance-dependent natural communities they rely on, require a proactive, hands-on management approach,” shared Conservation Director Abbie Church. “Management efforts over the years have included prescribed fire, daylighting oaks, planting prairie and trees, clearing cedar trees, pulling garlic mustard, and so much more.”

In addition to providing a safe space for native plants and animals, Cassville Bluffs SNA provides public access for hiking, birding, snowshoeing, fishing, nature photography, and hunting. If you’ve never heard or seen a yellow-billed cuckoo, an indigo

bunting, or a red-headed woodpecker, this would be a great place to go and find them, especially during the spring migration and nesting seasons.

As with all land conservation projects, maintaining the natural assets and protecting the native species is the biggest job. The Conservancy and the DNR have collaborated in the stewardship of Cassville Bluffs SNA for years. And then there are the unplanned events, such as the blowdown that occurred in 2015, taking many mature trees down and necessitating extensive cleanup work. The most recent collaboration was a prescribed burn in late March (2026).

“Here at the DNR, we are grateful for our partnerships with Mississippi Valley Conservancy and other land trusts throughout the state,” said Rathman. “They bring local relationships, acquisition opportunities, and eyes on the ground. With the DNR’s

budget shortfall, the Conservancy really helps keep things going at Cassville Bluffs. This place exists in its current state because mankind has nurtured it for generations. Together, we are a vital link in that chain.”

### **Seeking site steward**

*One of the Conservancy’s biggest challenges in managing nature preserves is the endless need for habitat management. To help support the health and resilience of the wildlife and natural communities, we enlist the help of volunteer site stewards.*

*Site stewardship can be as simple as visiting a property and noting observations. It can also include assisting with habitat management needs or leading volunteer work parties. Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area is one nature preserve in need of a site steward. To learn more, visit our website at [MississippiValleyConservancy.org/get-involved/site-steward](https://MississippiValleyConservancy.org/get-involved/site-steward).*

# Abbie Church named *Land Trust Professional of the Year* by Gathering Waters

*By Karen Solverson*

Some people protect land from behind a desk. Others do it from the middle of a prescribed burn in full firefighting gear while hauling equipment up a bluff, or crossing a cold stream on a landowner's property, or carefully hanging onto the side of a cliff to document a rare plant. Some meet with partners to determine how to best work together to solve a common problem. Some wade through wetlands, while others write grants. Some even climb trees with a chainsaw to get the job done.

Abbie Church is ALL of those people, and more. We are incredibly proud to share that Mississippi Valley Conservancy's Conservation Director, Abbie Church, has been named Land Trust Professional of the Year by Gathering Waters—one of the highest honors for conservation professionals in Wisconsin.

For nearly two decades, Abbie has dedicated her career to protecting the Driftless Area landscapes that so many people love.

Since joining Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 2007, she has helped permanently protect more than 27,000 acres across nine counties. Under her leadership, the Conservancy now stewards more than 30 nature preserves and more than 150 conservation easements, while continuing to build strong relationships with landowners, farmers, families, and conservation partners across the region.

But statistics alone don't tell the whole story. If you know Abbie, you know her passion is matched only by her determination. One day she may be deep in legal conservation easement paperwork or leading meetings with staff and partners. The next, she's carrying a chainsaw up a steep bluff face, identifying birds by sound, spotting rare plants most people would walk right past, or helping landowners see their property in a completely new way.

She brings an extraordinary mix of toughness, humility, intelligence, patience, and deep care to



every acre she protects and every person she works beside. She is meticulous and detail-oriented, critical traits for all of the legal work that land conservation demands, and she instills those same high standards in our conservation team. Her knowledge of ecology, botany, and conservation is remarkable, but what truly sets her apart is her ability to connect people emotionally to the land.

This award recognizes excellence in conservation, but for those of us lucky enough to work alongside Abbie, it also celebrates something bigger: relentless dedication, quiet leadership, and a lifelong commitment to protecting the places that make this region so special. Congratulations, Abbie!



## Find your connection to the land

There's something special about spending time in the places you have worked so hard to protect. Maybe you'll discover a new plant or bird on a guided hike, learn why fire is essential to a healthy prairie, or lend a hand removing invasive species. Every experience offers a chance to learn something new—and to become more connected to the land and the conservation work happening close to home.



Explore our upcoming events and volunteer opportunities, with new programs opening for registration

four to five weeks in advance. Find something that sparks your curiosity, roll up your sleeves, lace up your hiking boots, and join us. The more time we spend on the land, the more we come to understand why it's worth protecting.

*MississippiValleyConservancy.org/events*



### Connect in new ways with the land you love



- Take a hike with someone special
- Volunteer at a nature preserve
- Attend a *Linked to the Land* event
- Support conservation close to home

### Put your IRA to work for conservation

Together, we can do more to protect undeveloped land and the clean, cold water that flows through the Driftless Area. Forests, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands provide habitat for wildlife, nourish our communities, lift our spirits, and give us places to connect with nature.

If you are age 70½ or older, you can make a gift directly from your IRA to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. If you are required to take a minimum distribution (RMD) from your IRA, your gift can count toward all or part of your RMD.

To make a gift from your IRA, provide your administrator with the following information:

**Legal name:** Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Inc.

**Mailing address:** 1309 Norplex Drive, Suite 9, La Crosse, WI 54601

**Federal tax ID number:** 39-1871201

*We thank  
these generous  
organizations for  
their support.*

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1309 Norplex Drive, Suite 9  
La Crosse, WI 54601  
608.784.3606  
[MississippiValleyConservancy.org](http://MississippiValleyConservancy.org)  
[info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org](mailto:info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org)

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently protected more than 27,000 acres of bluffs, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands in Wisconsin's Driftless Area since its founding in 1997. Over 7,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and outdoor recreation.

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# SAVE THE DATE

for our *Fall Fundraiser* for  
Keeping the Driftless Wild & Scenic

Thursday, November 5, 2026  
5:30 - 8:00 p.m.

Radisson Hotel in La Crosse

Together, we're protecting the places that matter most.

Our Fall Fundraiser brings together passionate supporters like you for an inspiring night of community, connection, and impact.

- Participate in live and silent auctions
- NEW THIS YEAR! A plated meal that will provide more room for our guests
- Hear powerful stories of success that highlight the difference your support has made
- Preview plans for the coming year
- Learn how you can help to protect the places that matter most

Because the most meaningful conservation starts close to home—and it begins with you.