



Conservancy Notes
SPRING 2026

Conservancy expands Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area with acquisition of Bald Bluff

By Dave Skoloda

Mississippi Valley Conservancy has expanded Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area with the acquisition of Bald Bluff, an 86-acre property adjacent to the existing nature preserve. The newly acquired land has been carefully stewarded by the late Jim Sime and Rose Sime, who purchased the property in 1985 and spent the last four decades managing it with conservation in mind.

In the early years of owning the property, the Simes began prescribed burning and removing invasive species to preserve the land's diverse natural communities. In 1998, they placed a conservation easement on the upper elevations of the property with The Prairie Enthusiasts, permanently protecting its

forested blufflands and remnant bluff prairies from future development. They also enrolled the land's agricultural fields in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program, planting them with perennial cover.

With the addition of Bald Bluff, the Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area now spans 475 acres, creating a contiguous habitat block with expanded opportunities for public hiking, hunting, and nature appreciation. The Bald Bluff acquisition by the Conservancy builds on the Simes' conservation legacy in Grant County, where they have protected two other

(continued on p. 4)

The Bald Bluff property offers stunning scenic views of the surrounding rural landscape, including open grassland and steep wooded bluffs, while providing space for native plants and wildlife. (Photo by Abbie Church)

Keeping watch, together

A message from Carol

It's a good feeling to know someone is keeping watch when you're away.

Years ago, we had a little white pygmy goat named Miss Goatee (original, I know!). She was an anniversary gift from dear friends who knew us well enough to know we'd appreciate a goat.

More than once, I'd come home from running errands, open the door—and there she'd be. Sitting up on the couch like she belonged there. She'd look up as if to say, "Oh, you're back. Everything's under control."

You might be wondering how a goat ended up in the house. As it turns out, our simple wooden screen door didn't have a latch, and Miss Goatee quickly figured out how to let herself in. Once inside, she made herself very comfortable—quietly, confidently keeping watch.

I think about Miss Goatee often and it reminds of the work we do together.

At Mississippi Valley Conservancy, we are that steady presence—working with landowners, restoring habitats, keeping watch, and ensuring that the lands entrusted to us are protected for the long term.

When a family wants to protect their farm...

When a prairie is restored with care...

When an important piece of land becomes available...

We are there, doing the work.

And behind that work is you, a second layer of steady presence.

Your support, your generosity, your time, your belief—makes it all possible. It's the steady presence that allows us to show up, every day, ready to do what needs to be done.

Two layers of care: the work itself, and the support behind it.

You are the steady presence behind it all. Together we make sure the land is cared for, protected, and passed on.

Just like Miss Goatee—quietly, confidently, making sure everything is as it should be.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director



To learn more about goats and conservation, see story on page 12.

Protecting local habitat starts at home

How to slow the spread of invasive plants

Garlic mustard

How to identify: Second-year plants grow 1–3 feet tall with triangular, toothed leaves and small four-petaled white flowers. Crushed leaves smell like garlic.

Why it's harmful: Garlic mustard spreads rapidly in forests and releases chemicals that disrupt soil fungi that native plants and trees rely on.

How to remove: Remove in early spring before flowering (March–May). Hand-pull plants including the root. Bag flowering plants so seeds don't spread. Large patches may require targeted herbicide in early spring or fall.



Buckthorn

How to identify: A shrub or small tree with oval leaves that have curved veins and fine teeth. Twigs often end in a small thorn. Produces clusters of small black berries in late summer.

Why it's harmful: Buckthorn forms dense thickets that shade out native plants and prevent tree regeneration.

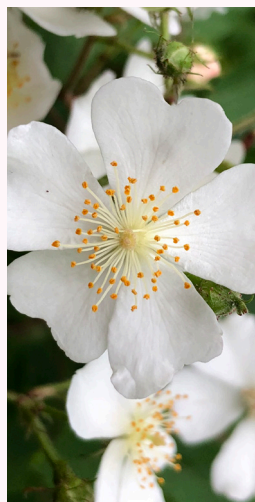
How to remove: Remove in late fall when buckthorn still has green leaves but most native plants are dormant. Pull small plants or dig them out. Larger shrubs should be cut and treated with herbicide to prevent regrowth.

Multiflora rose

How to identify: A thorny shrub with long arching canes. Leaves have 5–11 small leaflets and a fringed base where the leaf meets the stem. Produces clusters of small white flowers followed by red rose hips.

Why it's harmful: Forms dense thorny thickets that crowd out native vegetation and reduce usable wildlife habitat.

How to remove: Remove in late spring through fall. Pull small plants or dig roots. Larger shrubs should be cut and treated with herbicide. Repeated mowing or burning can help control young plants.



When we know more, we can do more: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Invasives>

Boscobel Bluffs... (continued from cover)

properties through conservation easements. In addition, they recently worked with Driftless Area Land Conservancy to turn their 140-acre Big Rock property into a nature preserve, furthering their commitment to protect and share these unique ecosystems in Grant County.



Jim and Rose Sime enjoy a fall day at Bald Bluff on a visit with the Conservancy and WI DNR staff. (Photo by Abbie Church)

Abbie Church, conservation director at the Conservancy, said, “This latest acquisition allows us to continue the Simes’ legacy of stewardship. It also strengthens our ability to conserve this critical habitat in Grant County. Accepting the responsibility for habitat management is a big undertaking on disturbance-dependent communities like prairie and oak woodland, but Jim and Rose made it possible by generously establishing a habitat management fund to support restoration in perpetuity.”

The purchase was made possible with funds from Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, the

National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) Hunting Heritage Super Fund, the Wisconsin Land Fund, and a generous donation from the Simes. NWTf has previously supported the Conservancy’s turkey habitat improvement projects and contributed to the acquisition of the 198-acre Woodman Floodplain property a few miles downstream on the Wisconsin River. NWTf district biologist Clayton Lenk emphasized the broad public benefits of the latest acquisition. “It’s not just for turkey hunters,” he said. “This property provides accessible outdoor space for people from the surrounding Midwest population centers, supporting a range of recreational uses.”

The name “Bald Bluff” is a reference to the property’s three remnant bluff prairies, which Jim and Rose often referred to as the three “balds.” More than 170 plant species have been documented on the prairies, including at least five state-listed species along with notable species such as short green milkweed, cylindrical blazing star, hoary puccoon, smooth cliff brake, Indiangrass, prairie dropseed, and porcupine grass.

The forested portions of the property are dominated by mature bur, red, and white oak with understory species including leadplant, Canada wild rye, panicgrass, upland boneset, alumroot, and Culver’s root. The forested bluffs and open grasslands provide habitat for species such as whitetail deer, wild turkey, black-billed cuckoo, yellow-billed cuckoo, blue-gray gnatcatcher, gray catbird, barred owl, Cooper’s hawk, red-tailed hawk, and many more.

Jim traced his love of the land to his grandfather, who lived on the edge of Soldiers Grove and took Jim on hikes to look at the flowers. “Then he’d pretend to get lost and tell me to find my way back and taught me the names of all of the flowers,” which really enhanced Jim’s sense of adventure and appreciation for natural areas.

As a young man, Jim knew he wanted to own some land and finally saved enough to buy 80 acres of steep and rocky pasture and woods in 1965. In the late sixties, Jim found out that a bike trail was planned through an adjacent area which was filled

with prairie forbs and grasses, and so he “started digging up as many plants as he could, planting them on the 15-acre prairie at the top of the bluff,” according to Rose, “and to this day, people are amazed that he started prairie restoration back in the sixties.”

A self-described amateur botanist, he started studying everything he could learn about the plants on his properties and in the area and discovered that his property has an incredible amount of diversity. Rose cherishes the after-effects of the controlled burns, creating “a tapestry of greens and flowers as the summer turns to fall. It is infectious to work on the land, and not just for the boys,” said Rose with a laugh as she described working with the chainsaw and running the drip torch during their burns.

In a recorded interview with students taking an Environmental Conservation in the Driftless course from the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, Rose described their years of careful land stewardship—especially the process of identifying its many species—as “days filled with awe.” After 40 years of documenting all of the changes to the land, Jim has boxes and boxes of journals to tell the story for generations to come. Jim encouraged the young interviewers to keep a journal as he did, recording each day at a property the new things they found and who they did it with. “It will make you live longer if

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IN MEMORIAM

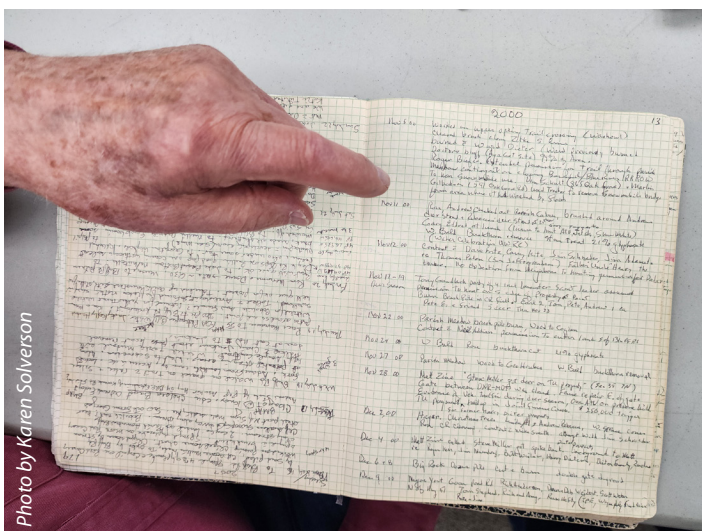
We are deeply saddened by the passing of Jim Sime on January 26, 2026, and profoundly grateful for the life he lived and the legacy he leaves behind.

Jim was a quiet force in conservation across Wisconsin—someone whose love for the land showed not in words alone, but in decades of steady, committed action. He believed deeply that protecting natural places was both a responsibility and a gift to future generations, and he lived that belief every day. Prairies, forests, bluffs, and waters across our corner of the state are healthier and more resilient because Jim cared enough to act.

Jim gave his time, his wisdom, and his heart generously. Whether restoring habitat, supporting conservation organizations, teaching students, mentoring others, or simply showing up when the land needed a steward, he did so with humility and persistence. He never sought recognition, yet his impact is unmistakable and enduring—written into the landscapes he helped protect and the people he inspired along the way.

Those who worked alongside Jim remember his thoughtfulness, his integrity, and his unwavering belief that conservation succeeds best through cooperation and shared purpose. He understood that lasting change happens when people come together for something larger than themselves.

Jim’s legacy lives on—in the land, and in us.



Landowner Jim Sime shares one of countless journals which document the work done on Bald Bluff over the past 40 years.

Boscobel Bluffs... (continued from page 5)

you do it,” he added with a smile. “That’s how Abbie knew the exact date of her first visit to the Boscobel property; it was noted in my journal.”

Over time, the couple, both former teachers in Madison, acquired more than 600 acres in the Driftless Area that have been protected through conservation easements or other partnerships with conservation organizations. “We’re no longer buying,” Rose said with a laugh. “We have always just enjoyed spending time on the land, and working

and ecological value are protected for generations to come like Jim and Rose have done, contact Mississippi Valley Conservancy at (608)784-3606 or MississippiValleyConservancy.org. For those interested in exploring Boscobel Bluffs SNA and learning more about how to protect the land, the Conservancy regularly offers volunteer work parties. Visit the website to find out how you can make a difference. (Special thanks to Atira Conservation, which supported this acquisition through a grant to assist with survey costs.)



The prairie is thriving at Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area after decades of hard work.

the land was fun,” she said. It was a way to make friends and share accomplishments, but they always dreamed of eventually turning the land over to others who will protect it forever, and that time is now.

If you have spent years caring for a piece of land and want to ensure that its natural beauty

One of Jim’s final acts was to ensure that his Bald Bluff property was protected forever as part of the Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area.

We are proud to honor the memory of Jim Sime by continuing the work at Bald Bluff.

Fireflies in the Driftless

Why dark skies matter

By Frank Dravis

Few summer sights are as quietly magical as fireflies flickering over wet meadows and shaded ravines—and the Driftless Region of southwest Wisconsin offers some of the best habitat for them. “Firefly,” also known as “lightning bug,” refers to beetles in the family *Lampyridae*, a group whose diversity encompasses 179 described species and subspecies in North America and more than 2,000 worldwide.

Across North America, scientists and conservation groups have documented declines and growing evidence of pressure on some firefly species. The Xerces Society’s assessment, “State of the Fireflies,” notes that while data is sparse on firefly populations and trends—and funds to support in-depth research are limited—some species of the beetle are considered at risk from habitat loss, pesticides, climate change, and increased nighttime artificial light. Entomologists have noted year-to-year variability in sightings across southern Wisconsin. Wetter conditions after drought years can temporarily boost lightning bug birth and survival rates, obscuring long-term trends but not mitigating systemic and societal pressures.



Fireflies dance above lupines and under the dark skies of a nature preserve in New Mexico in a long-exposure photo. (Photo by Mike Lewinski)

The Driftless Region's patchwork of hardwood forests, prairies, streamside wetlands, and pastures provides the cool, moist, and heterogeneous microclimates many firefly species need. Because fireflies spend most of their lives as larvae in the ground or dwelling in leaf litter, woodlands with undisturbed understory and wet seepages in hill hollows are important. These areas are typically the last to succumb to farming and urban development and form refuges of biodiversity. Most people are unaware that fireflies live as grubs for several years, and that treating yards with chemicals designed to kill grubs can have a devastating impact on the firefly population. With fireflies dependent on native plant communities and areas free from chemicals, the conservation of these areas therefore benefits fireflies as well as amphibians, pollinators, and the birds they feed.

Ironically, for fireflies the greatest emerging threat is one that can be turned off with the flick of a switch. How's that for a solution? Artificial light at night is harmful because fireflies use bioluminescent flashes—those ethereal twinklings that conjure images of will-o'-the-wisps—as the primary way to find and court mates. Streetlights, yard lights, and building lights wash out these flashes or disrupt their timing, reducing mating success even where ideal habitat remains undisturbed. Expert firefly guidance emphasizes the reduction of unnecessary lighting as a simple and high-impact conservation action. Many light fixtures are installed for decoration, advertising, or convenience, not safety, and turning off some or all of these lights at night will give the fireflies a better chance for long-term survival.

Is there a code in those blinking

lights? Fireflies produce light through a chemical reaction in a unique abdominal organ, and they control the flashes by regulating oxygen to it. Different species use distinctive flash patterns—numbers of blinks and intervals—as a “coded” courtship language so males and females of the same species can locate each other. Disrupt that signal with artificial light, and the conversation gets muffled.

For fireflies, the call to action—as mirrored by the Dark Skies Initiative—involves the thoughtful use of light. Dim or shield outdoor lights. Use motion sensors for farm work areas, low-intensity warm lights around the house, timers with short periods, or simply turn lights off when not needed. By making small choices like these, each of us can help keep the Driftless landscape a haven for fireflies and countless other species.

Farm fields forever:

Landowners protect 127 acres near the Mississippi River

By Sarah Bratnober

When they acquired 87 acres of land nestled between bluffs near the Mississippi River in Vernon County back in 1993, Marilyn Adam and Ralph Tauke had a good idea of what they were getting into. They had both been raised on dairy farms in northeast Iowa, so they knew that caring for land would be a big undertaking. Some years later, they acquired additional acreage across the road while considering the wishes of the previous owner, who had expressed a desire to protect her land from development. On November 20, 2025, Marilyn and Ralph signed an agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy to ensure that none of their 127 acres of land will ever be subdivided or developed.

Their primary objective in buying land was to have a place where they could live near their jobs in La Crosse and enjoy caring for and riding their horses right outside their door. Marilyn had ridden horses all her life, and she and Ralph had one of those “love me, love my horses” marriages. Ralph fulfilled that wish, and they moved to the farm where they enjoyed the quiet open space for horseback riding, hiking, bird-watching, and hunting.

Their exceptionally scenic property is nestled in a valley just



Conservancy staff Kendra Brown, Abbie Church and Connor Kotte celebrated the closing of the Tauke's conservation easement with Marilyn and Ralph. (Photo by Carol Abrahamzon)

southeast of Stoddard and contains rolling agricultural fields and two large forested bluffs that offer views of the Mississippi River all the way to Brownsville, MN. While they don't farm the land themselves, a cooperating farmer manages it with conservation practices that include crop rotation, no-till farming, contour planting, alternating strips, and grassed waterways to filter runoff, prevent erosion and support soil health to protect the farmland soils, some of which are designated as “farmland of state-wide importance” and “prime farmland.”

The proximity of their land to Coon Creek was an important consideration for Marilyn and Ralph as they sought to lease their agricultural fields. They recounted

times when water was over the road in both directions from their property, and they knew that using chemicals on their low-lying hilly fields was a threat to water, to pollinators, and to the health of their soil. When they approached two brothers who were operating a nearby farm about leasing their fields, Marilyn and Ralph expressed their desire to keep chemicals off the land. The brothers agreed to give it a try. As their relationship with the farmers grew, they also discussed with them the idea of organic farming. The brothers were amenable to that idea, too, and they've been producing organic alfalfa, corn, and hay on the property's 50 acres of cropland ever since.

Other inhabitants of the property also benefit from Marilyn and

Ralph's wise land management practices. The state threatened little brown bat uses the property, which is part of a forested corridor that connects with the Mississippi River valley two miles to the west. Little brown bats use the Mississippi River as a migratory flyway, as do a diversity of migratory songbirds, including ovenbirds, hermit thrushes, yellow-rumped warblers, blue-winged warblers, and American redstarts that have all been seen on the property.



Various wildlife species call the property home, including ruffed grouse. (Photo by Allen Blake Sheldon)

Ralph has spent years hunting for turkey, deer, squirrel, and mushrooms. Marilyn recalls hearing the song of the whip-poor-will higher up in the valley, but that was some years ago.

Since moving to Viroqua for their retirement years, Ralph and Marilyn regularly visit the land to enjoy the peace and beauty they've worked hard to protect. They're planning to convert a portion of the agricultural fields to perennial cover in

the future to provide additional habitat for grassland nesting birds and pollinators.

The permanent protection of this farm supports local planning initiatives, including the Vernon County Land & Water Resource Management Plan, the Vernon County Farmland Preservation Plan, and the Vernon County Comprehensive Plan. The open fields of the property and proximity to La Crosse put this property at high risk for residential development. Marilyn and Ralph reached out to the Conservancy and were motivated, in part, by the volume of offers they had received from people interested in purchasing and developing their land.

"Marilyn and Ralph have cared for their land in ways that protect not only their soil and their neighbors in the valley, but everyone downstream, too," said Connor Kotte, stewardship specialist at the Conservancy. "Their stewardship of the land is an ideal pairing of sustainable agriculture and habitat management."

Marilyn and Ralph retain ownership of their land, and the conservation easement they've signed with Mississippi Valley Conservancy allows them to continue managing it as they have. It even allows them, or future owners, to build a home or cabin in a designated area of the property. Such tailoring of a conservation easement is only possible before it is recorded at the county Register of Deeds. The easement does not allow public access and permanently protects the land and

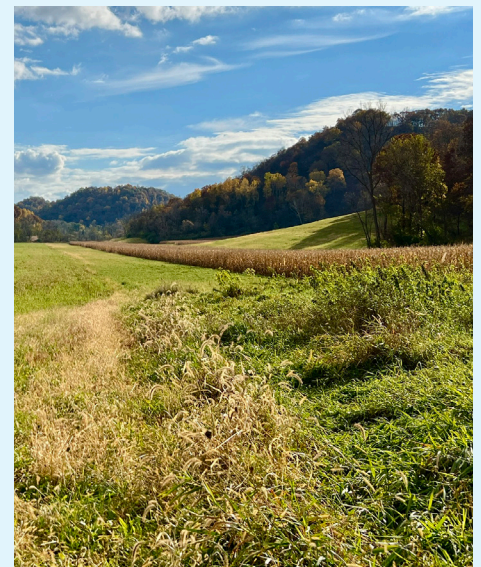


Pollinators like these sulphur butterflies benefit from the organic and conservation-minded practices on Marilyn and Ralph's farm. (Photo by Connor Kotte)

resources from habitat destruction, residential development, mining, detrimental practices, and fragmentation from subdivision.

Thanks to the conservation efforts of Marilyn and Ralph, the wildlife will continue to thrive in this valley.

Conservation practices like crop rotation, no-till planting, and grassed waterways keep these fields—and the soil beneath them—healthy for generations to come. (Photo by Sarah Bratnober)




A bluff, a cedar, and a shared past

By Max Sorenson, Habitat Technician

High on a bluff above the Mississippi River stands an eastern redcedar that first put down roots in the 1760s—decades before my family crossed the Atlantic in search of a new home. While my ancestors were making their way to what they called the “New World,” this tree was already growing in the wind and light of the Driftless Area. In many ways, this story—of restoration, family, and place—begins with realizing that the land here was already old, already holding memories, when my family arrived.

Eastern redcedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) establish rapidly in open habitat when periodic fire

A slice of the cedar's branch revealed more than 260 rings of growth. (Photo by Payton Lott)



“We live in a permanent present that comprises all that has arrived and endured.”

—Curt Meine and Keefe Keeley,
The Driftless Reader

and seasonal grazing are absent, quickly allowing shade-tolerant trees to forest even exposed bluff faces. In our restoration work, the removal of encroaching cedars is often the first step toward restoring an untended bluff prairie. But restoring a landscape is rarely as simple as removing every undesired species—we need to look closely at the history the land holds.

Early in 2026, the land management team spent a morning clearing a cedar grove high on a bluff above the Mississippi River at Angel Bluff, a Conservancy nature preserve located east of Winona in Buffalo County. A burn is planned here this spring and we were reducing fuel just downslope from the burn break.

The grove was mostly even-aged cedars with feathery reddish bark, along with buckthorn, birch, and a small clump of switchgrass beneath their shade. But one cedar stood apart, draped over a sandstone outcrop: a split-stemmed tree with one trunk spiraling skyward and a dead stem reaching outward over the rock. Gnarled and

smooth, it was clearly old.

While we were cutting a neighboring cedar, the dead stem broke from its hollow base. Curious, we cut a few “cookies” to take home and finished the morning by “daylighting” the remaining living stem—clearing young cedars and brush that shaded its branches. A few days later, Restoration Coordinator Payton Lott sanded his slice and counted the dense rings. By his count, the tree is at least 261 years old, putting its first growth rings in the 1760s.

Suddenly, the timeline of this cedar stretched far beyond our morning of restoration work, reaching back into the lives and movements of people who once traveled this valley—including my own family. On August 2, 1855—within the dark latewood of the cedar’s 90th ring—a group of Swiss-German immigrants passed nearby on their way to a new home near Waumandee. Six generations back, Anna and John Conrad Ulrich brought my family to a “New World” that, according to the aged cedar, was already old.

By 1873, my family had moved to Fountain City, just five miles upriver from the old cedar. John Conrad Ulrich later wrote the memoir that passed these stories down before his death around 1890.

Since then, my family’s history has followed the Mississippi River—by foot, boat, and highway. My



Land Manager Levi Plath carefully balances on the steep side of Angel bluff as he clears some of the cedars that shade the prairie and prevent new growth. (Photo by Max Sorenson)

great-grandmother spent summers on a houseboat while her father and grandfather worked on river improvements like wing dams and shore protection. Her love of the Mississippi shaped future generations. Eventually, my grandfather returned to the area, raised a family, and bought a farmhouse east of Galesville. In February 1969, my mother was born in Winona. By then, the old cedar across the river had already lived more than 200 years.

In 1999, my grandparents placed their 77-acre property—where my mother grew up—into a conser-

vation easement with the Conservancy, ensuring its permanent protection. Years later, when our family had to sell the land, that easement helped us hold on to something lasting: the knowledge that its pine forests, owls, orioles, “wild” apples, and lady’s-slippers will remain part of the future.

The land holds legacies of grief and joy, dispossession and connection, presence and absence. The rings of the old cedar record this complexity, alternating light and dark—each year holding both in balance.

Restoration and conservation, when done well, invite us to acknowledge the deep histories held in the land. In daylighting this old cedar, we honor a piece of living history and steward continuity rather than obscuring it.

Through this work, we take a step toward restoring our collective relationship with place—reconnecting with traditions of stewardship and recognizing the Indigenous stewards who have remained rooted here long before that cedar began reaching toward an open sky.

A different kind of conservation crew

Story by Karen Solverson

On a crisp fall morning on a Trempealeau County farm tucked between the bluffs, an unlikely conservation crew surged up a hillside, eager to get to work. They came in every color imaginable—tan, brown, black, and white—some small and nimble, others larger and more deliberate. A few naturally took the lead while the rest followed close behind. They carried no tools, required no fuel, wore no hard hats, and needed no coffee breaks. But they did arrive with one essential qualification for the job ahead: they were hungry. Extremely hungry.

These goats had one mission: tackle a patch of land that had become thick with invasive plants and weeds—turning an overgrown area into an opportunity for restoration. For landowner Karen Hanson, the project was both practical and personal, reflecting her commitment to caring for land that has been part of her husband's family since the late 1800s.

In 2022, Karen protected her 261-acre farm with a conservation easement held by Mississippi Valley Conservancy to ensure that her family farm, with soils designated as “farmland of statewide importance” by the Natural

Resources Conservation Service, would remain undeveloped and protected into the future. This protection was part of a larger dream that began with her husband Bud, who passed away eight years ago. “This farm just meant so much to my husband,” Karen explained. “He wanted to be sure the farm would always be protected.”

But simply conserving land does not mean leaving it untouched.



These happy goats ran right up the hill to begin their conservation work.

Thoughtful, proactive management is often essential to maintaining the health of conserved landscapes. In Karen's case, the challenge began when a portion of the cattle pasture stopped being grazed. “This strip used to be pasture,” Karen said pointing to an area completely congested with invasive buckthorn, weeds, and multiflora rose. “But once it wasn't being used anymore, it just grew up into all kinds of weeds.” The family farm has a long history

of organic practices, so using a spray to kill the weeds was not an option for her. The area was also on a very steep slope, which made mowing impossible. Instead, she began researching alternative ways to manage the vegetation and soon discovered targeted goat grazing—a method increasingly used across the country to control invasive plants without chemicals or heavy equipment.

Her search led her to Vern Klingbeil, owner of Green Man Acres and a regional affiliate of Goats on the Go. After visiting the property and discussing Karen's goals, Vern brought in a herd of Kiko and Spanish goats and set up temporary fencing around roughly an acre of dense vegetation. At first, the goats were almost impossible to see in the thick growth. But within days, their impact became clear. “After about a week, it was like a whole new landscape,” Karen said.

Goats are particularly effective at tackling invasive plants because they prefer woody shrubs, vines, and broadleaf weeds. As they graze, they also provide additional ecological benefits. Their hooves lightly disturb the soil surface, helping to aerate the ground and create conditions that allow new plantings to establish. “There are no chemicals and no heavy machinery involved,” Vern explained. “The

goats remove vegetation naturally, and when we seed an area, their hooves help work that seed into the soil.”

Vern launched his goat grazing business four years ago after studying environmental science and biology. Today, he manages a herd of about 100 goats and works with landowners across western Wisconsin. He is just one of many passionate goat graziers who believe in making an environmental impact naturally across the Driftless Area. The only cautionary tale Vern shared was that goats can't distinguish between an oak seedling and an invasive shrub, so in areas where people want to protect native trees, some extra thought needs to go into the plan.

Karen's project ultimately expanded beyond simply clearing the overgrowth. After the goats completed their first round



Without the cattle grazing this section, Karen had no way to control the invasives.

of grazing, she began exploring ways to establish more desirable vegetation in the area. Working with Vern and Mitchel Block, conservation specialist for the

Conservancy, she decided to seed the cleared ground with a mix of prairie plants, such as butterfly-weed, black-eyed Susan, and sky-blue aster, designed to be relatively deer-resistant and easy to walk through.

The goats returned for a second round of grazing before the seeding, helping prepare the soil. Now Karen is waiting to see what emerges this spring. Her willingness to try something new reflects a larger truth about conserved land. Conservation easements protect landscapes from residential development and mining, but they also support landowners who are actively caring for their land—managing forests, restoring habitat, and controlling invasive species.

Conservancy staff work closely with easement landowners to provide guidance and ensure that management activities support the conservation goals of each property. “Seeing Karen try an innovative solution, like targeted goat grazing, shows the kind of commitment to stewardship that these landscapes often need to remain healthy for future generations,” says Mitchel Block. “This kind of stewardship is what the conservation easement is meant to support.”

Karen sees the partnership with



In no time at all, the goats devoured invasive honeysuckle, multiflora rose, and other invasive shrubs and plants, leaving the land ready for a spring seeding with a prairie seed mix of grasses and forbs.

the Conservancy as an important part of the process. “The Conservancy encourages landowners to do things that are environmentally good for the land,” she said. For landowners facing invasive species challenges of their own, the goat-powered approach may offer an option worth considering. Brush will still resprout after the goat grazing, so it typically is one step in a management process, making an area easier to get to and a project more manageable. While goats aren't the right solution for every situation, they can reach places that machinery cannot and offer a natural way to reduce unwanted vegetation.

On Karen's farm, this first year of her goat grazing experiment proved to be the perfect way to attack her specific problem. And as an added benefit, their work may soon give rise to something new—a patch of native prairie where weeds and invasive shrubs once stood tall, and another example of how conserved land continues to be actively and thoughtfully cared for.



Upcoming opportunities to learn and give back

Time spent on the land has a way of staying with you. Whether you're pulling invasive species, planting for the future, or listening to a naturalist share their knowledge, these moments create a deeper connection to the places we protect together. Our events page is filled with opportunities to get involved, with new programs opening for registration 4-5 weeks in advance.

Take a look, find something that speaks to you, and join us—you might be surprised by how meaningful a few hours outdoors can be.

MississippiValleyConservancy.org/events

Your next adventure awaits: Take the Trail Trek Challenge

Step outside and experience the beauty you help protect. The Trail Trek Challenge invites you to explore the Conservancy's nature preserves at your own pace—whether you hike solo in quiet reflection or share the trail with friends and family.

With 19 unique trails across the Driftless Area, you can discover prairies alive with wildflowers, sweeping bluff-top views, snowy vistas, and peaceful wooded valleys, all while challenging yourself to complete at least five hikes. It's free, flexible, and designed to reconnect you with the land—because the greatest reward isn't just checking off trails, it's the moments of wonder you'll find along the way. Sign up online to receive your free trail guide!



MississippiValleyConservancy.org/ttc



Connect with the land you love today



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

Your land. Your legacy.

You can ensure your land stays farmland or natural habitat—**forever**. Visit the website to learn how a conservation easement can protect your land for future generations.

MississippiValleyConservancy.org

Book review: Pollinator Parade

Written by Nick Nichols, illustrated by Pete Hodapp,
OPE! Publishing, La Crosse, WI, 2025

By Steve Gardiner, *Big River Magazine*

Many things are happening around us all the time that we do not notice. Standing in a backyard, one person might notice the clouds; another might see the birds, the squirrels, the bugs, or the weeds; still another might hear the birds, the kids down the street, or the train a quarter mile away; and still others might smell the barbecue next door. Unfortunately, many only notice what's on their phone.

In the short graphic novel *Pollinator Parade*, Charli and Ivan hang out in their grandparents' backyard pollinator garden, where they are drawn into a new world of bees, wasps, flies, beetles, butterflies, moths, and caterpillars, then sent home with plants to begin their own pollinator garden.

It's a quick read and a great book for an adult to read to children to provoke curiosity about the natural world and send them out to the backyard with a magnifying glass. Content like this—"Some flies, like these here, mimic bees,

but you can tell the difference because the flies have two wings and the bees have four"—is the sort of lore that kids and adults enjoy using and information that adds detail and dimension to the natural world.

The drawings are colorful and move the story along. The interactions between the kids, grandparents, and the next-door neighbor peeping over the fence are lively and cheerful.

This fictional narrative is great for kids and adults and is available from The Nature Place in La Crosse: natureplacelacrosse.org/what-we-dol/pollinator-parade.

Proceeds benefit The Nature Place and Operation Pollination.



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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved more than 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 snowshoeing.

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