

The logo for the Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA) features the letters 'ILPA' in a stylized, bold font. The letters are filled with a light green color and have a darker green outline. The letter 'P' is uniquely designed with a small silhouette of a tree inside its upper loop. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a forest path in autumn, with trees displaying vibrant yellow and orange foliage. A person is walking away from the camera down the path, which is covered in fallen leaves.

**ILPA**

**INDIANA LAND PROTECTION ALLIANCE**

**STATE OF THE LANDS**

**2024**

*Together.*



## ABOUT THE ALLIANCE

Indiana Land Protection Alliance is a vibrant nonpartisan network of land trusts, conservation partners and community members. Our alliance champions land and water protection for all of Indiana.

Our mission is to increase the pace and quality of land and water protection in Indiana by enhancing the capacity of our conservation community.

## 2023 IN NUMBERS



**185,000+**

Acres protected forever

**65**

New conservation projects, protecting

**10000+**

Acres restored in 2023

**7041**

Acres

**240**

Miles of trail to enjoy

**47,000+**

People engaged

**2,900+**  
Active volunteers



ILPA convened land stewards from across the state at NICHES Land Trust for our annual Stewardship Gathering.



Collectively, Indiana land trusts serve all 92 counties in Indiana. Remnant habitats, wildlife corridors, working lands, scenic landscapes, and cultural lands -- Our member land trusts are working together to protect these special places forever.

### Please Welcome Our Newest Members



Find your local land trust at [protectindianaland.org](http://protectindianaland.org)

### Director's Note

Unity seems to be a rare and special gift these days, which is one of the many reasons I cherish our alliance. Our conservation work protects the very lands and waters that unite us culturally and geographically, and is only achievable through diverse partnerships and collaboration. We come together to function as an ecosystem akin to those we work so hard to protect.

Together, we had another remarkable year in 2023. With our many partners, we helped to secure the State's largest investment into the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust, an historic \$10M for land conservation. We planned and executed a statewide educational and outreach campaign about wetlands, the Indiana Wetlands Challenge. New partnerships were formed to promote increased study of important natural areas. Additionally, we elevated our shared conservation message to a wider audience through new mediums, including the publication of our first-ever State of the Lands report.

This year's greatest success is the continuation and enrichment of camaraderie within our land conservation community that we've come together to grow. We provided year-round programming that united Indiana land trusts' board, staff, and volunteers, culminating with our first-ever formal conference this past January. Through these experiences, we have not only fortified our alliance, but we are also cultivating meaningful friendships. Subsequently, our members are continuing to work closely together on land acquisitions, stewardship projects, and providing peer support. I am particularly excited about our continued growth as we welcome four new members: 101 Lakes Trust, Wesselman Woods, Cardinal Land Conservancy, and Friends of the White River.

Lastly, after successfully advancing 2021's ambitious three-year strategic plan, we have commenced a new strategic planning process with the Conservation Consulting Group. Together, we are charting our next five years (and beyond). We look forward to sharing that plan with you in the coming months.

When I think about conservation in Indiana, I am reminded of H.E. Luccock's quote, "No one can whistle a symphony. It takes an orchestra to play it." It takes all of us to overcome the challenges, effectuate our shared vision for healthy and resilient habitats, and celebrate the wins. Thank you for being a part of our work! We hope our stories from this past year leave you feeling energized, inspired, and restored.

*Andrea Huntington*

Andrea Huntington, Executive Director  
Indiana Land Protection Alliance

Cover Photo: Crossing a bridge at Sargent Road Nature Park.  
Photo courtesy of Ben Miller / Mud Creek Conservancy





# Next Level Program a Win-Win

## Central Indiana Land Trust

### Putnam County Gem Protected Forever

LAND PROTECTION

Fern Station, nearly a square mile of contiguous mature forest, is a place where native flora and fauna have ample space to thrive. In 2023, a large group of partners came together to protect this 570-acre Putnam County property forever.

Central Indiana Land Trust, Inc. (CILTI) has a long history with this forest. Walking the property with the landowner in 2008, CILTI staff knew instantly that the land was nature preserve quality. But it would take a decade and a half to realize the dream of protecting this stunning natural area in perpetuity.

In 2022, Gov. Eric Holcomb's Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT) infused \$25 million into land protection projects throughout the state. This three-to-one matching program awarded CILTI a \$3.1 million conservation grant toward Fern Station.

A) Aerial view of Fern Station property. Photo courtesy of CILTI.  
B) Celebrating the protection of Fern Station. From left, Rachel M. Simon, Chris Smith, Governor Eric Holcomb, Cliff Chapman, and Stacy Cachules. Photo courtesy of Emily Persic.  
C) Blue Heron Nature Preserve. Photo courtesy of Mud Creek Conservancy.  
D) Autumn colors. Photo courtesy of LC Nature Park.

*Innovative state funding program leverages private donations to save land.*

The landowner had already worked with CILTI to put many acres under protection over the years, so staff approached him about Fern Station. Unable to find a buyer, he had been considering dividing and selling the property.

All this galvanized staff and supporters to raise the remaining \$1 million to purchase the property. Without the state funding and the incredible outpouring of support, the land might have ended up in a very different status—but the forest is safe forever.

Fern Station is just north of The Nature Conservancy's Fern Cliff Nature Preserve. CILTI's ultimate aspiration is to connect the two protected areas.



## Mud Creek Conservancy

### Donor Dollars Make Addition Possible

LAND PROTECTION

After breaking ground on their first public nature park and facilitating the donation of two new preserves in 2023, Mud Creek Conservancy (MCC) kicked off its 30th Anniversary in 2024 by finalizing the purchase of the future "Blue Heron Nature Preserve," protecting nearly 12 acres of forests and wetlands bordering Mud Creek.



This achievement piggy-backed off the success of the organization's first acquisition in 2021, when a two-year grassroots-funded capital campaign secured a half a million dollars for the purchase of the 26 acres opening this spring as "Sargent Road Nature Park".

"We have been working tirelessly since 2019 to purchase the property for Sargent Road Nature Park and to implement our vision for it," said Ben Miller, MCC President.

"As an all-volunteer land trust, we already had our hands full, but we weren't going to shy away from additional opportunities to protect wetlands and forests in the Mud Creek Valley." That opportunity came when Miller learned about the Next Level Conservation Trust.

"It was thanks to ILPA hosting a presentation and Q&A with Indiana DNR that I figured out that we could leverage our hard work and community fundraising from the Sargent Road Nature Park campaign as match for this impactful grant. Once that clicked, I knew we had to try to pull something off," Miller said.

"The NLCT was as "win-win" as it gets for us," Miller said. "We would not have had the capacity to purchase these 12 acres at this time without the grant, and we welcomed the added protection of DNR conservation easements at these two sites."

Along with Fort Benjamin Harrison State Park and the Fall Creek Greenway, the Mud Creek Valley contributes to one of Indianapolis's largest remaining and highest quality natural habitats, consisting of over 2,500 acres of contiguous forest. This large forest corridor provides a home to wildlife not typically found in urban areas, such as great horned owls, slimy salamanders, box turtles, flying squirrels, and even the endangered Kirtland's snake.

## LC Nature Park

### Where the Bison and Elk Roam

LAND PROTECTION

In 2022 LC Nature Park was awarded grant funds from the Next Level Conservation Trust which allowed them to acquire an additional 106 acres, bringing the size of the park to over 300 acres. The property's former crop fields are being restored to native habitat such as sedge meadows and wetlands, tallgrass prairie, shortgrass prairie and upland prairies. An existing woodlot will remain with plans of eliminating invasives that have taken hold. The additional grazable land will supplement the grazing opportunities for the herds of bison and elk that live at LC Nature Park, lessening their dependence on supplemental feed and providing more room to roam.

LC Nature Park is located in the Little River Valley in Northeast Indiana. The property is on the former reserve of Chief Akima Neewilenkwanka of the Myaamia (Miami) Nation, according to maps dated from 1834. The Myaamia Nation of Indians of Indiana are active in this region and seek to protect, promote, record, and share the Myaamia of Indiana's history, language, culture, and heritage.

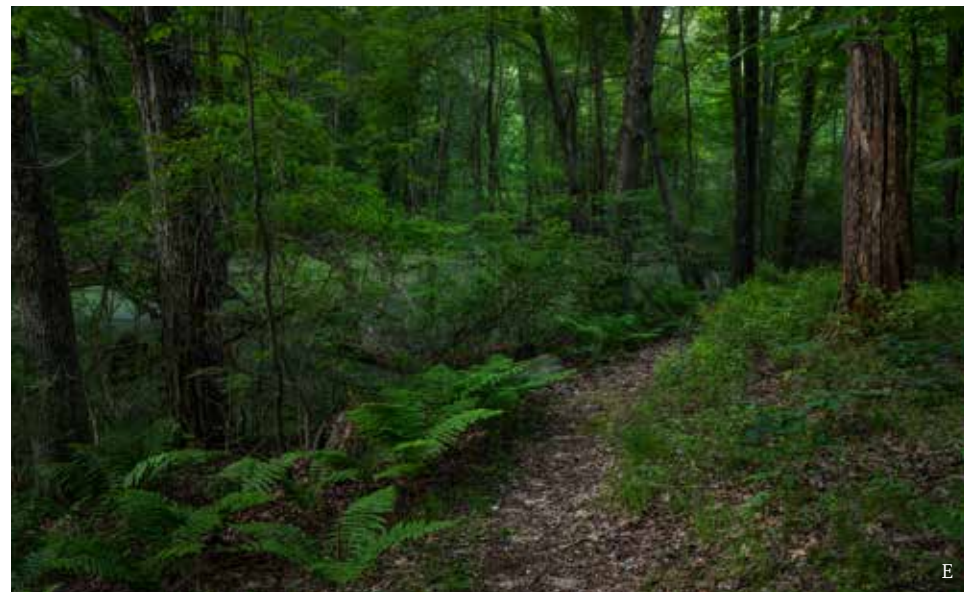


Today, about 2,000 acres of forest, restored prairie, and restored wetland in the Little River Valley are protected by several organizations, including Little River Wetlands Project, Allen County Parks Fox Island Nature Preserve, ACRES Land Trust, and LC Nature Park. By restoring the cropland to tallgrass prairie and wetland, the adjacent Little River will receive less runoff, improving water quality. Downstream flooding will be reduced as the restored property releases water more slowly into the Little River after rainfall events. Restoring habitat along the Little River will also enhance this critically important wildlife corridor. The Little River and the Little River Valley are geologically, historically, and environmentally significant.



# Protecting Land, Forever

*Land trusts offer an important pathway for conserving private land, vowing steadfast commitment to its enduring protection.*



## ACRES Land Trust Celebrating 50 Years Protected

MILESTONE

This past year, ACRES Land Trust celebrated 50 years of protection for Ropchan Memorial. While certainly not ACRES oldest nature preserve, celebrating this preserve's 50-year milestone speaks volumes to ACRES continued commitment to "protecting land, forever."

The 80-acre preserve features a ridge moraine, a kettle-hole lake and boulders from rocky outcrops farther north, all showing visible evidence of the retreating great glaciers long ago. Tamarack, yellow birch and

E) Path passes by forested pond. Photo courtesy of Elijah Stewart.  
F) *Pyrola americana*. Photo courtesy of Nathanael Pilla.  
G) Flowers attract a tiny fly. Photo courtesy of Elijah Stewart.



red maple lie in the lower wetland, while red, white and black oak, as well as shagbark hickory, dominate the drier land. Tussocks of cinnamon fern, mountain holly, and winterberry decorate the forested bog.

In 1973, ACRES acquired this unique property with funding supplied by two conservation-minded members, Sam and Adeline Ropchan. The Ropchans were among some of the first members of ACRES Land Trust when it was formed in 1960. The preserve would later gain additional acreage in 1974, 1975 and 2010, doubling the size of the original acquisition - a great example of what is possible with planning and time.

In 1983, a botanical inventory was conducted at the preserve, and nearly 40 years later, in 2022, a second inventory took place -- turning up rare plant species like *Pyrola americana*. These surveys help ACRES



understand what is growing and how to best care for the land. They also help tell the story of how the plant community has changed over the decades. Protecting a natural area for 50 years allows for a richer understanding of the living plants and critters that inhabit it.

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Ropchan Memorial is a reminder of what can happen when people work together to protect high-quality land for the benefit of all - today and in the future. Thanks to its forward-thinking members, ACRES has been able to preserve spaces that are becoming increasingly rare, including several wetlands like bog inside the Ropchan Memorial nature preserve.

Indiana residents benefit today from actions taken by conservation-minded folks 50 years ago. Imagine what benefits Indiana will see in the next 50 years because of the work today's land trusts do across the state.

## Indiana Karst Conservancy Making the Connection

LAND PROTECTION

In 2023 the Indiana Karst Conservancy met a long term goal of connecting Wayne Cave Preserve, which they have managed since 1986, to the nearby National Speleological Society's Richard Blenz Nature Preserve.

Over the years the IKC has enlarged their now 77-acre preserve, but efforts to purchase a connecting property from key landowners had fallen through. By working closely with these local landowners, the group was able to secure the 20 acre expansion in development-prone Monroe County in the important Garrison Chapel Karst Area. This not only connected the two preserves but also helped protect an ecologically rare sinkhole swamp on the edge of the preserve.

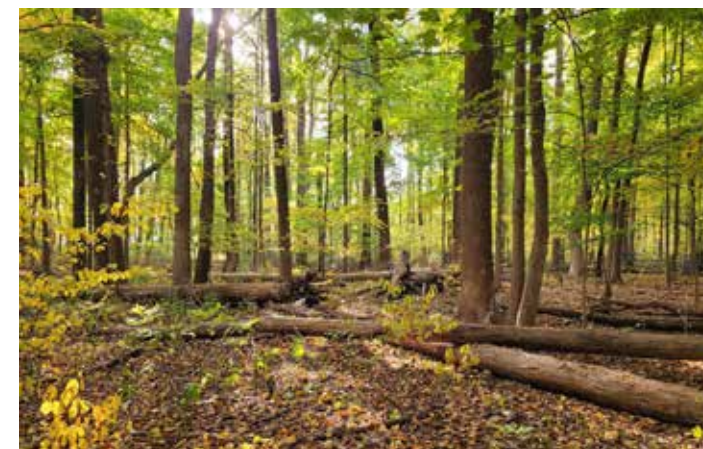
The Conservancy uses grass-roots efforts to fundraise and was proud to be able to close on the acreage with only five and half months of fundraising efforts, thanks to individuals who are passionate about cave and karst protection. Making this connection corridor now preserves over 120 acres on both preserves in the Garrison Chapel Karst Area.



Biologists survey at the edge of the sinkhole. Photo courtesy of Keith Dunlap.

## Ouabache Land Conservancy Plan Plants Roots to Success

MILESTONE



Sanctuary Oaks Nature Preserve. Photo courtesy of Claudia Cozadd.

In 2023, Ouabache Land Conservancy (OLC), based in Terre Haute, IN, finalized its first strategic plan, which will define its work over the next five years. The 2024-2029 strategic plan is a milestone for OLC that came together after the board underwent more than a year of collaboration to develop the plan.

All aspects of the strategic plan are in service of one overarching goal: to ensure a fortified infrastructure for OLC to protect and steward irreplaceable high-value conservation lands in west-central Indiana before they are lost forever.

The plan emphasizes four priorities – protecting and restoring natural areas within OLC's six county service area; educating the public and landowners about nature, improving water quality in watersheds, most notably the Otter Creek Watershed; and taking steps to keep OLC growing, financially healthy, and self-perpetuating.



## Wesselman Woods

### Urban Preserve Adds Acres

#### LAND PROTECTION

It is a rare feat to gain land and it is even rarer to gain urban land.

Wesselman Woods is seen by many as the environmental hub of Evansville, Indiana. This nature preserve may be surrounded by urban sprawl but Wesselman Woods was incredibly fortunate to acquire 90 additional acres of land thanks to funding and support from the Hamman Foundation, the University of Evansville, and the City of Evansville.

In this land deal, 16 acres of old-growth forest were added to what is already considered the largest urban old-growth forest in the United States. Additionally, a former 32-acre golf course was gifted to Wesselman Woods by the City.

What makes this story even better is that the remaining 42 acres (about twice the area of Chicago's Millennium Park) were part of a contentious 40-year history of land grabs and arguments. This is a huge environmental win for the area.



The expansion takes the Wesselman Woods property within feet of the Lloyd Expressway, one of the most traveled roads in Indiana. It also adds to the preserve's profile as a central attraction for visitors to the area and encourages donors to be a part of a local solution to global environmental challenges.

So, while the first challenge was acquiring the land, the next challenge is regenerating these areas.

The project begins with creating sections of meadows interspersed with germinated old-growth trees. Wesselman Woods has trees that are 250–300 years old. The goal during reforestation efforts is to procure, germinate, and maintain these same old-growth genetics because these trees have seen heat, cold, wet, and drought. The genetics of this forest are resilient.

Along with old-growth genetics, there is an opportunity to experiment with climate adaptive species in these newly acquired spaces. There will be a push for including tree species on the cusp of Plant Hardiness Zones 6, 7, and 8 including (but not limited to) overcup oak, burr oak, and river birch.

Wesselman Woods is a beacon for the future. This expansion, combined with intensive environmental education efforts, has caused the public to take notice and realize what a valuable resource this forest is. Their work will transform southwestern Indiana for generations to come.

## Oak Heritage Conservancy

### Island of Nature a Local Paradise

#### CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

The Hall-Carmer Wetlands is an island of nature surrounded by a sea of fertile farm fields in Jennings County. The surrounding forest includes white oaks, hickories, and gums that thrive on the wet soils. These "Flatwoods" communities are typically wet in the winter and spring and droughty in summer.

In 2023, Oak Heritage Conservancy completed an exciting project to make this unique wetland preserve more accessible to the public. A short wooden boardwalk and deck now offer a spectacular view of the small wetland pool that provides habitat for amphibians, waterfowl, and a wide variety of small mammals.



## The Nature Conservancy

### Milestone Acquisition a Rare Opportunity

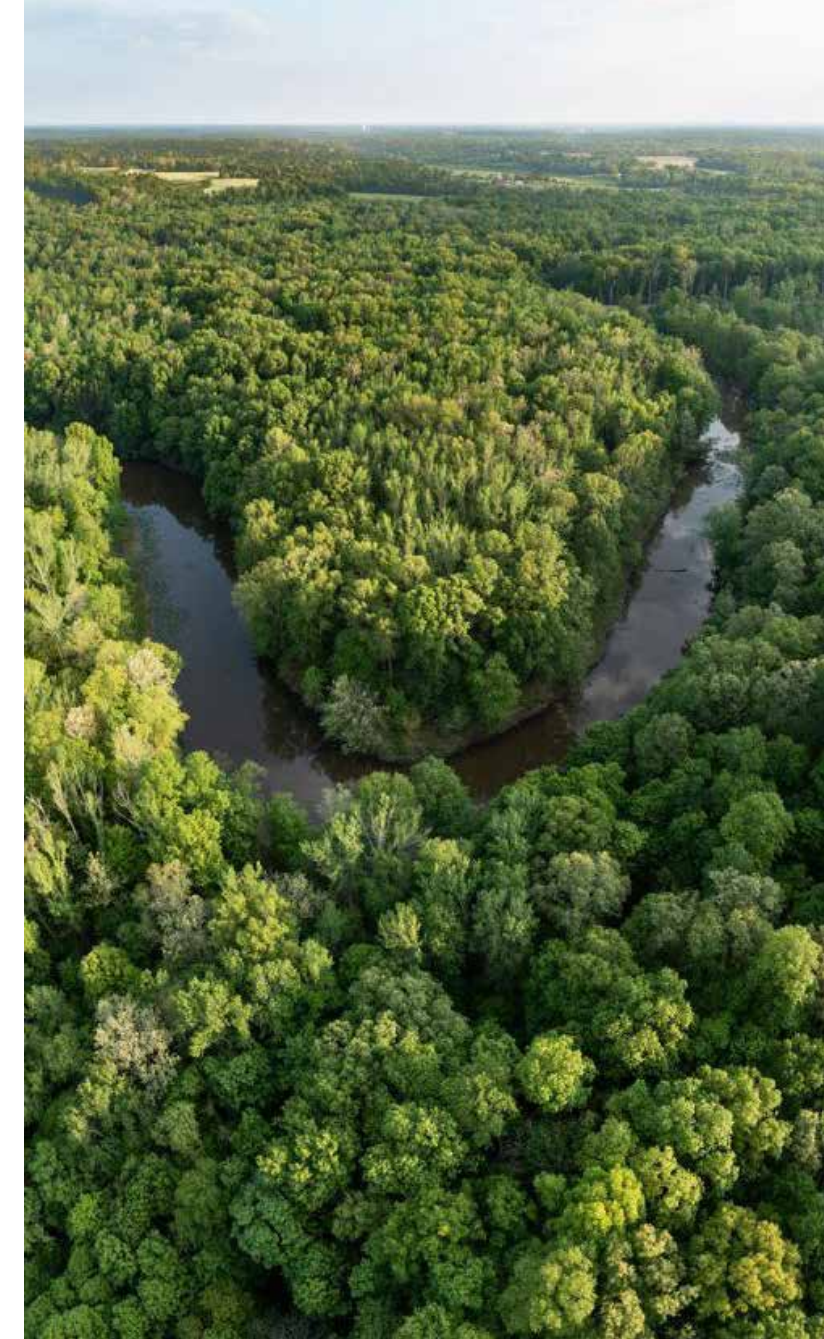
#### LAND PROTECTION

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Indiana Chapter recently closed on the purchase of 1,700 forested acres in Pike County, adjacent to the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). At least 63 animal species and 20 plant species considered threatened, endangered or of special concern by the State of Indiana live within the river valley, including federally endangered Indiana bats and nesting bald eagles.

"It is highly unusual to find such a large, wooded property all under one ownership in Indiana," said TNC's Director of Conservation Programs Matt Williams. "This was an unprecedented opportunity for land conservation in our state."

Built one new land acquisition at a time, the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge and Management Area will eventually stretch for 30 miles along the channels and meanders of the Patoka River in southwest Indiana. In January 2023, The Nature Conservancy in Indiana (TNC) completed purchase of over 1,700 acres in Pike County to help achieve this conservation vision. Private properties of this size are exceptionally rare in Indiana, and the acquisition was TNC's largest single land purchase since they purchased 7,000 acres at Kankakee Sands in northwest Indiana more than 25 years ago.

TNC is working with the Refuge to transfer this 1,700-acre acquisition into federal ownership, adding to the 10,000 acres of land already protected as part of the Refuge. The Refuge was established in 1994 to protect one of the few remaining expanses of bottomland forested wetlands in the Midwest. Once dominated by uninterrupted stands of mature forest, the natural lands within and around the Refuge have been steadily degraded by unsustainable timber harvest, conversion



Above: Indigo bunting sings. Top right: Aerial view of oxbow. Photos courtesy of Fauna Creative.

to agriculture, and subdivision for homes and hunting camps. And significant pressures remain. To address these threats, The Nature Conservancy joins the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Friends of Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge, Sycamore Land Trust – which protected the 1,000-acre Columbia Mine property in 2012 – and other partners who work with willing landowners in this important landscape.

The newly acquired property is contains an important natural freshwater feature: about 1.5 miles of a 2.5-mile-long oxbow lake, which will bring the entire lake and most of its immediate watershed into the Refuge. A priority within TNC's state-wide floodplain conservation strategy, oxbow lakes can act as storage reservoirs for flood waters, allowing excess water to collect and mitigating human and economic losses during natural disasters. They also filter water, which improves water quality, and they provide habitat to a variety of wildlife, including young fish, migratory birds and waterfowl.





# Easements Add Options

## Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D Land Trust

### *Support for Farmland Preservation Inspires Expansion*

LAND PROTECTION

The Wood-Land-Lakes Land Trust has been partnering with landowners to protect farms and farmland for 26 years, beginning in Elkhart County. The original by-laws guided their work in six priority counties, but also includes the prophetic phrase “not limited to,” a sign the original board could envision a program or reason to include a possibility to expand beyond the original six counties.

Opportunities to expand their services to serve a growing interest in farmland conservation started to occur in 2003 until eventually projects had been completed in 11 counties; 38 conservation easements protecting 11,486 acres.

In 2023 the board decided to officially embrace the “not limited to” language and offer preservation options in all Indiana counties, and to work with farmland owners



interested in the USDA ALE program. The ALE program pays farmland owners up to 50% of the development rights value which is typically donated to the land trust with a conservation easement.

With only a few land trusts in Indiana focusing on farmland preservation, and even fewer able to provide the resources required for the ALE program, WLL's experience, ability and willingness to work with this program is important for everyone interested in preserving farmland, farming, and farm families.

"Our hope is it will encourage more farmland owners to consider a conservation easement." Said board member, Mike Yoder.



*Conservation easement programs expand options for landowners and land trusts to preserve Hoosier heritage.*

## George Rogers Clark Land Trust

### *Farm Easement Programs Grow*

LAND PROTECTION

The word is getting out about Farmland Conservation Easements and protecting land in perpetuity. This protection helps provide assurance for food security and fiber production within local communities.

George Rogers Clark Land Trust is working with several landowners to place voluntary conservation easements on their property, working with the USDA NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to apply for funding for the purchase and closing of easements.

The latest easement lies within the Blue River Watershed in Harrison County. Part of this farm has been in the family for 200+ years. It provides grassland and timber resources for production and alternatively provides wildlife habitat and water quality protections in this karst region of Indiana. Several threatened and endangered species will benefit from this permanent protection.



Harrison County landowners can apply for and potentially secure funding from the county government's Farmland Protection Program, which can help offset their costs for placing these perpetual easements. The farmland protection initiative in Harrison County is unique among Indiana counties.

*ILPA convened land trusts for its first-ever Winter Conference, which included an informative presentation by partners from Conservation Law Center about conservation easements.*



Beanblossom Bottoms. Photo by Chris Fox.

## Sycamore Land Trust

### *Mitigation Projects Protect Endangered Bats*

LAND PROTECTION

Sycamore Land Trust is working with conservation partners on projects to restore and protect critical habitat for Indiana bats, which have been listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. Sycamore Land Trust has partnered with ecological restoration companies including Resource Environmental Solutions (RES) and Magnolia to add new conservation easements that protect Indiana bat habitat.

RES and Magnolia acquire and restore land in critical habitat locations and sell mitigation credits to companies developing wind-farm projects in other locations of Indiana where Indiana bats are negatively impacted.

Sycamore serves as the holder of the conservation easements, and will monitor these protected properties to ensure that RES is adequately restoring them and that they remain protected forever.

Since 2021, Sycamore has protected over 750 acres of summer habitat close to known Indiana bat hibernacula (winter caves) including Ray's cave in Greene County, Indiana, and Jug Hole cave, the second largest Indiana bat hibernacula in the United States. Sycamore expects to take on a total over 1,000 acres of conservation easement specifically to protect Indiana bat habitat.



Photo by Kristina Arwood





# Hide and Seek

*Adding previously unlisted species to bioinventories is a proud moment for biologists.*

## NICHES Land Trust

### *Plant Inventory Guides Management*

RESEARCH

In the early 1990s, Gayle Tonkovich and Malcolm Sargent from the University of Illinois conducted vascular plant surveys at Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve, publishing “The Vascular Plants of Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve, Warren County, Indiana” in the Proceedings of the Indiana Academy of Science in 1993. During their work they described the habitats at the 160+ acre preserve with detailed maps and vouchered 351 species.

Since then, 30 years have passed and the preserve has seen significant changes. NICHES is working with Rich Hull of Indiana University, as part of a multiyear project to create fully vouchered plant lists for 11 NICHES sites in the lower Wabash Valley including Fall Creek Gorge.

In 2023, NICHES was awarded a grant through the Indiana Academy of Science and Indiana Land Protection Alliance to hire Nathanael Pilla with Midwest Biological Survey to supplement Rich’s efforts at Fall Creek Gorge and complete a paper following Tonkovich and Sargent.

Rich and Nathanael have already collected and vouchered 340 species from Fall Creek Gorge as of June, with a special focus on grass and sedge species and some of the more difficult to identify genus. These groups of taxa were not documented well in the 1993 project and bolstering efforts on these species will give us a much better view of the flora at the preserve and a new baseline to compare to as we move forward with active stewardship of the preserve. Vouchered checklists are the gold standard for species documentation and since NICHES is managing several other properties in the Big Pine Valley with significant habitat and species overlap with Fall Creek Gorge, this work will inform management beyond the preserve.



H) Rich & Nathanael during bioinventory surveys. Photo courtesy of Sam Cody.  
 I) Potholes in the sandrock bed of Fall Creek Gorge. Photo courtesy of Sam Cody.  
 J) Frog on sphagnum moss. Photo courtesy of Elijah Stewart.  
 K) American cancer-root. Photo courtesy of Emma Campolattara.



*In 2023, ILPA partnered with the Indiana Academy of Science to provide small grants that supported four bioinventory survey projects in Northwest, Central, and Southern Indiana.*

## Shirley Heinze Land Trust

### *Trail Work Makes an Impression*

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

In July of 2021, Shirley Heinze Land Trust’s stewardship staff and volunteers from Cleveland Cliffs began clearing brush to create a new accessible trail at Meadowbrook Nature Preserve. In November of last year, volunteers embarked on a project to thin out the woody invasive species that had begun to thrive along the trail edges.

Originally these workdays were intended to encompass a couple Meadowbrook Monday engagements, during which volunteers would cut target species along the trail. However, staff soon realized what they were up against. Even with the healthy attendance these volunteer workdays attracted, there was no way two three-hour installments would be sufficient. Therefore, the project lived on. In February, Volunteer Coordinator, Jim Haniford, and the dedicated volunteers (also referred to as the “Woody Warriors”) wrapped up their trail work for the season. Jim and the volunteers covered a total of 54,707 square feet or roughly 1.25 acres of land, during the course of the project.

One of Jim’s favorite moments was uncovering an American cancer-root (*Conopholis americana*) plant on the interior of the loop, its brown, dried-out stalks brittle in winter’s negligent caress. It’s a parasitic species, but harmless to its tree host. The uniquely-shaped plant is found in high-quality remnant habitat but can’t



tolerate too much disturbance. Considering where it was discovered, there’s good indication that their restoration is headed in the right direction.

After the last of the volunteers had gone home, Jim put away their equipment and scanned the project area. He reflected on how proud he was of what the volunteers had accomplished. While Jim collected his thoughts, a couple of shapes swooped into view. Two hawks cruised into the project area, flying fast and low. Immediately following, three deer picked their way through the same area. Similar to the find of American cancer-root, Jim takes encounters like these as confirmation that they’re on the right path.





## Red-Tail Land Conservancy

### Growing Habitat at Home

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Growing Home™ educates, encourages, and empowers homeowners to transform their yards into wildlife-friendly habitats by implementing sustainable practices such as planting native flowers, and providing food, water, and shelter. By doing so, participants not only contribute to local biodiversity but also experience personal benefits such as reduced yard maintenance, community beautification, and the joy of observing birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.



The certification program serves as a powerful educational tool, engaging homeowners in learning about local ecosystems and the importance of biodiversity. Growing Home™ is unique in the educational resources the program provides. A committee of local botanical specialists, including Master Gardeners, biologists, horticulturalists, and science educators, created a step-by-step guide for gardeners detailing how and why to create homes for wildlife in their personal outdoor space. Red-tail Land Conservancy donated 20 wildlife gardening books to local libraries.

*Red-tail Land Conservancy's community-driven program Growing Home™ won a 2023 Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence. It is the highest environmental award bestowed by the state of Indiana and is reserved for projects that show innovative, transferable, and outstanding achievements that positively impact Indiana's environment.*

Additionally, the Growing Home™ Committee offers one-on-one mentorship for gardeners who need help getting started or want ideas about improving their backyard habitat. This hands-on approach to education can foster a greater sense of environmental stewardship and inspire participants to make more sustainable choices in other aspects of their lives.

One of the key reasons why the certification program is important is its potential to create a network of interconnected habitats across communities. By attracting and supporting birds, pollinators, and other beneficial wildlife, Growing Home™ certified habitats build a network of pocket nature preserves where local and migrating wildlife can thrive. By 2023, there were 125 Growing Home™ certified habitats across eight counties and 13 cities in east central Indiana. The program has created green corridors that allow wildlife to move safely through urban areas.

The Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence recognizes the program's effectiveness in engaging the community and achieving measurable conservation outcomes. By encouraging individuals to take concrete actions to support wildlife and ecosystems, the program demonstrates the potential for small-scale, community-driven initiatives to make a meaningful impact on larger conservation goals.

As communities continue to face environmental challenges, programs like Growing Home™ serve as inspiring examples of how collective action can lead to significant and lasting change, offering a unique and accessible way for individuals to contribute to conservation efforts while enhancing their own living spaces.

## Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy

### Fun Run Tours Preserves

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

The Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy, located in the Northeast corner of Indiana, hosted its first 5k/10k run on July 8, 2023. While many Clear Lake families and organizations have hosted this run annually for over 20 years, last summer was the Conservancy's first opportunity to lead this community tradition. With a perfect 10k distance around the lake, runners were able to pass many of nature preserves and properties while enjoying the sights and sounds of the lake waters.

In addition to the timed runs, families were invited to participate in a 1 mile run/walk or hang out near the finish line to enjoy the "Fun Day" portion of the event with a DJ, food truck, face-painting, bounce house, and scavenger hunt. Participants also had the opportunity to learn more about conservation programs from various Conservancy partners. The event hosted a total of 163 runners with family and friends and was made possible thanks to 56 volunteers.



The Conservancy celebrated another important milestone in 2023, the hiring of a new Executive Director, Caroline Barth. Together, with Program Assistant, Tracy Hughes, staff and dedicated volunteers are hard at work planning the next Run Day, Fun Day on July 13, 2024. The Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy hopes to continue this tradition of community appreciation and outreach for years to come.



## Wawasee Area Conservancy Foundation

### A Win for Water Quality at Wawasee

MILESTONE

In December 2021, the Wawasee Area Conservancy Foundation (WACF) announced that the Wawasee Area Watershed received the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) designation. This recognition makes it a priority watershed for additional federal funding to support clean water initiatives, and now over \$1 million in federal funding has been allocated for the local agricultural community.

NWQI is a premiere USDA program focusing on partnerships between federal, state, local and private resources to support voluntary on-farm conservation investments that benefit soil health and water quality by reducing erosion and nutrient runoff.

WACF identified the opportunity areas, resource needs, developed goals and established metrics to track project progress. With the help of local staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) and key watershed experts from the region, WACF successfully applied for federal cost-sharing dollars in the amount of \$1,245,000 and received approval for the full amount.

The funds will be split evenly over three years, administered locally through the Kosciusko County NRCS. One hundred percent of the funds will go to farmers in the Wawasee Area Watershed, in both Noble and Kosciusko Counties, as a cost-share for implementing conservation practices.

"As a longtime farmer in our watershed, I know firsthand the difficulties of trying to protect my soil health, crops and productivity," stated M. Russell Anderson, local farmer and WACF Board of Director. "I am excited to see the USDA leading this voluntary initiative and am grateful to have the opportunity to work with them to make an impact."

Clean water is a precious commodity and one that requires collective stewardship to maintain. To that end, WACF invested in their ground-breaking WINS study to accurately measure the amount of nutrients and sediment entering and exiting Lake Wawasee. WINS data revealed how much precious and costly nutrients and soil are being lost from farmland and inadvertently ending up in local streams and lakes, which negatively impacts both the watershed and local farmers.



## Blue Heron Ministries

### *Stewards Sustain Duff Lake Fen*

#### STEWARDSHIP

In 2023, Blue Heron Ministries celebrated the completion of their second Sustain Our Great Lakes (SOGL) grant for work at LaGrange County Parks' Duff Lake Fen and adjacent parklands. For the last three years, their experienced ecological restoration team systematically traversed 104 acres of hydrologically and vegetatively-restored fen, prairie, and oak savanna to treat woody and invasive species. Spot-applications of herbicide were used to meticulously control scattered patches in the prairie fen.

Annual prescribed fires were conducted on all the acres during the grant cycle. This was no small feat. During the project's three-year grant cycle, LaGrange County Park constructed an extensive trail network, including nearly two miles of boardwalk through the high-quality fen of Duff Lake Fen, that the team had to work safely around. Their work paid off, and visitors to the Park can now more intimately experience the unique plant and animal life and fen hydrology.



The team was rewarded with a rare sighting of a Massasauga rattlesnake, a reminder of the importance of their work. The team's close monitoring also led to the early detection and an immediate response to a new invasive species, hairy willow herb, which appeared in the restored fen.

## Little River Wetlands Project

### *Wildlife Haven Gets a Boost*

#### STEWARDSHIP

The newest addition to Eagle Marsh is a property that was acquired by Little River Wetlands Project (LRWP) in 2019, containing a mix of high quality wooded wetland and wet prairie. Areas of the 75-acre wooded wetland had been overtaken by invasive species that threatened to encroach on remaining remnant habitat. Thanks to the support of a USFWS 5-Star grant, restoration began in 2023.

The LRWP stewardship team and many dedicated volunteers planted over 1000 native trees and shrubs, including various oak species and buttonbush, in addition to hundreds of wetland and woodland forbes.



This work supports the hundreds of native species that already reside there, including the endangered Blanding's turtle.

Since LRWP focuses on restoring habitat in an urban setting, this property acts as a place of refuge for the precious wildlife of Allen County and for many species migrating through. Not only has this restoration project created a more ecologically sound ecosystem, it has become a fantastic location to host education programs. People of all ages, from 3 to 83, have enjoyed hiking the two trails, learning about birds, invasive species, trees, fungi, and more.



Protecting Indiana's landscapes also means caring for them forever, and requires being able to identify the unique flora and fauna that make these places special. Plant identification and monitoring native species are critical to responsible land management.

In June, ILPA sponsored thirteen land stewards to attend a two-day hands-on workshop in Northern Indiana. The program focused on plants within the sedge family (Cyperaceae) with a bias towards the Carex genus, of which Indiana has approximately 158 species.





## Archaeological Research Institute

### Land, History, and Culture Intertwine

#### STEWARDSHIP

To generate sustainable and lasting relationships, collaboration is key. The land stewardship team at the Archeological Research Institute (ARI) is doing just that to achieve a sustainable environment and in the protection of cultural resources.

The land stewardship team is currently working on a collection of projects including the installation of experimental gardens, developing long term research programs, invasive species removal and monitoring, as well as the creating educational resources.

At a glance it may be difficult to recognize the connection between archeology and land stewardship. However, the two disciplines are directly intertwined.



Both disciplines have the mission of showing people that the land is far more than dirt; that these locations, which are cared for by archaeologists and land stewards, are worth protecting. The partnerships created between individuals involved in cultural resource management and land stewardship are critical for ensuring both needs are met.

The land stewardship team hopes to serve as a model for other places which are located on historically significant land or lands which have cultural value. Although archeology can uncover fascinating details of the past on its own, land stewardship may prove a whole new avenue for preservation with its substantially untouched potential.



## Oxbow, Inc.

### Wildlife and Research Abound

#### RESEARCH

Oxbow, Inc. is a land trust welcoming research endeavors. Spanning 1400 acres at the mouth of the Great Miami River where it meets the Ohio River, this site presents a unique convergence of geology, nature, and human history. Almost annually, a new species of bird, mammal, fish, or invertebrate is discovered in the Oxbow, previously unreported in the area.

In 2023, in collaboration with Purdue University at Ft. Wayne, a bat listening survey was conducted, revealing the potential presence of endangered bats and confirming the presence of one threatened bat species. Collaborative efforts with our neighbor, the Archaeological Research Institute, uncovered artifacts spanning 3000 years of human habitation and activity in the vicinity. These initiatives, alongside similar endeavors, foster educational opportunities and contribute to our understanding of cultural evolution and natural dynamics in our interconnected communities.



# Coming Together for Indiana's Wetlands

Wetlands are more than beautiful and unique landscapes. They are essential to the health and future of our communities. Wetlands replenish groundwater and filter out harmful nutrients and chemicals. They store carbon, and serve as giant sponges, absorbing flood waters to protect our homes, farms, and businesses. They also provide food and shelter for 50% of species with small or declining populations in Indiana, including 79 Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

With this in mind, we created and launched the Indiana Wetlands Challenge. The goal of this program was to educate family, friends, and community members about the importance of wetlands. ILPA members and partners from around the state are calling on all Hoosiers to take the Indiana Wetlands Challenge, and they have accepted our invitation with excitement.



Middle: Wetland at Munsee Woods. Photo courtesy of Red-tail Land Conservancy.  
Bottom: ACRES Land Trust staff pose at a selfie station. Photo courtesy of ACRES Land Trust.

Under the initiative, we developed a curated guide to some of Indiana's most exceptional wetlands properties and published an illustrated infographic about wetlands wildlife. Many of the sites featured in the guide participated by hosting special exhibits with interpretative signage and a selfie station, creating an educational and fun experience for the whole family! Members of the public were able to use the stations and ILPA's website to "send a selfie" to their state legislators, which were delivered to state legislators at the capital during the 2024 session.

We are off to a great start spreading the word about wetlands, but our work is far from finished. Our wetlands continue to need your help. Explore a wetlands site near you, and join us in coming together for Indiana's wetlands.

*Take the challenge!  
Download your guide with  
the QR code.*





Indiana DNR Director Dan Bortner and his team have been invaluable partners and friends to Indiana land trusts. For the past two years, we've united conservationists from across the state at the Indiana Historical Society to celebrate our collective accomplishments. This year, we toasted important conservation milestones, including the State's dedication of the 300th Nature Preserve, Toothwort Woods Nature Preserve -- a momentous occasion for all who love the land.

## Department of Natural Resources

### *A Legacy Worthy of Celebration*

#### MILESTONE

Originally published in the January/February 2024 edition of Outdoor Indiana.

Life's milestones stick with us, and in the Bortner household, they're cause for celebration.

When it comes to preserving Indiana's exceptional natural places, Indiana recently hit such a milestone worth celebrating: The dedication of our state's 300th nature preserve, Toothwort Woods Nature Preserve in Jennings County. For those of us who love history and nature, this is a big deal.

Nature preserves safeguard natural places in Indiana that are home to something noteworthy, whether that's distinctive plants, geological features, or habitat for wildlife that needs extra protection.

How we got here is a fun story. In the 1960s, when many Americans had their eyes on the moon and the stars, here on Earth, Hoosiers came together to pass the Nature Preserves Act, which allows us to permanently protect special places of natural significance across the state. Pine Hills Nature Preserve at Shades State Park became Indiana's first nature preserve.



Photo by Kristina Arwood

Fast forward to the 1990s, and Indiana established a fund to help acquire and protect such land, which is now called the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust Fund.

Today, thanks to the Hoosiers who came before us, the DNR, private land trusts, universities, and local communities have permanently protected 55,769 acres of Indiana as nature preserves.

It's a legacy worthy of celebration. Check out on.IN.gov/naturepreserves to learn more about these special places, how to visit them, and how you can join our cause in protecting them.



Photo by John Maxwell



A creek winds through Fern Station Nature Preserve. Photo courtesy of Central Indiana Land Trust.



Our work is made possible thanks to the generosity and commitment of our foundation partners, members, corporate partners, and donors. Together, we are making a difference.



Like you, we care about nature and Indiana's special lands. Join our movement in support of land conservation.



[www.protectindianaland.org](http://www.protectindianaland.org)



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