



# State of the Lands

*2026*



# Director's Note

The cornerstone of ILPA's work is bringing people together. In the past year, we have taken key steps to advance the goals in our Strategic Plan, which serves as our compass for elevating land and water conservation across Indiana. After months of listening, learning, and planning with members, partners, and supporters, we developed this plan to reflect a shared vision of what Indiana's conservation community can accomplish together. Through these exciting new initiatives, we are building the collaborative ecosystems that will help Indiana's conservation community thrive for generations to come.

Among these initiatives, we are excited to introduce the Indiana Conservation Excellence Program. This program will serve as a forward-thinking framework of best practices, peer mentorship, shared resources, and expanded support networks to strengthen our member land trusts. Indiana land trusts excel at leveraging limited resources, and their lean but dedicated teams undertake critical work with remarkable outcomes. This program will focus on expanding their capacity and ensuring every organization has what it needs to grow and succeed on its journey. Stronger land trusts mean more land protected, more water conserved, and a more resilient Indiana.

Looking ahead, we will lay the foundation for collaborative, landscape-scale conservation planning by mapping the wildlife habitats, water corridors, working lands, and the cultural and natural resources that land trusts protect. Just as our members unite fragmented habitats and landscapes into something whole and resilient, ILPA is working to connect the people, organizations, and communities doing this vital work across our state.

At a time when common ground can feel increasingly hard to find, conservation endures as a rare and powerful exception. As Former Governor Mitch Daniels reminded us at this year's Winter Reception, this work remains "one of the few topics on which people can come together, on which those who may not agree about other things can find common purpose and cause." That spirit of shared stewardship is what unites our alliance, and it is why your partnership and support are so important.

Finally, thanks to the generosity of our donors and members, ILPA has grown its team this year, strengthening our ability to serve you and advance land protection across Indiana. We still have a lot of ground to cover, and we are energized by the path ahead.

You are an essential part of this work. We hope the stories shared throughout this report offer a meaningful glimpse into the extraordinary conservation work happening across Indiana. Thank you for walking alongside us.



Together and in perpetuity,

*Andrea Huntington*

Andrea Huntington  
Executive Director

## Peer Gatherings Build on Tradition, Cultivate New Ideas

What began as a small gathering of dedicated land stewardship professionals has grown into one of Indiana's most valued opportunities for peer learning and connection across the conservation community. The second Indiana Stewardship Gathering brought together staff from NICHES Land Trust, ACRES Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Central Indiana Land Trust, and Little River Wetlands Project in August 2017. Since then, the gathering has evolved into a longstanding tradition led by ILPA, with only a brief pause during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, the gathering has expanded into a three-day experience focused on professional growth, practical skill-building, and relationship-building across Indiana's land trust community. Most recently, in partnership with Shirley Heinze Land Trust and the Indiana Dunes State Park, participants engaged in sessions on seed collection in remnant black soil prairies, GIS applications, environmental assessments, wetland restoration, prescribed burn planning, and bioinventory data management. Field visits to the Great Marsh in Beverly Shores, Indiana Dunes State Park, Cressmoor Prairie, and Ambler Flatwoods Nature Preserve gave attendees the opportunity to apply these skills in the field.

The 2025 gathering was supported by the Roy Whistler Foundation, with speakers and contributors from Orbis Environmental Consulting, Midwest Biological Survey, the Indiana Prescribed Fire Council, The Nature Conservancy, Indiana Dunes Tourism, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, and Shirley Heinze Land Trust, reflecting a strong spirit of partnership across the conservation community.

*Images: Stewards gather at the beach at Indiana Dunes State Park for dinner (top), photo by Sarah Barnes; Stewards at the 2017 gathering during a session in the field (bottom), photo via Facebook.*



The growth of the gathering is clear. The most recent event welcomed 70 participants from 22 organizations. Just as meaningful is the sense of connection it fosters. Stewardship work often happens in quiet, dispersed places, where peers may be miles apart and challenges are worked through alone. Bringing these professionals together creates something powerful, a space to share knowledge openly, learn from one another, and build lasting relationships grounded in trust and shared purpose. It is a reminder that no one is doing this work alone. Through gatherings like this, ILPA is strengthening not only individual practitioners but also a statewide community committed to caring for Indiana's lands, together.

## Interstate Collaboration

Ever wonder where a state association like ILPA finds inspiration for new ideas and programs?

ILPA has been fortunate to build meaningful relationships with peer state associations, Prairie State Conservation Coalition (PSCC) in Illinois and Gathering Waters (GW) in Wisconsin. What began as occasional opportunities to connect through convenings by Land Trust Alliance, has grown into an ongoing exchange of ideas, experience, and encouragement among colleagues who have also become friends. These relationships are now a steady part of ILPA's learning and growth, creating space for honest conversation, shared problem-solving, and inspiration across state lines.

We are especially grateful for leaders like Cynthia Kanner (Executive Director of PSCC) and Mike Carlson (Executive Director of GW) and their teams, who so generously offer their time and insight. Their openness in sharing tools, lessons learned, and practical approaches has directly shaped new and emerging efforts in Indiana. These include inspiration from Gathering Waters' postcard campaign, Illinois and Wisconsin's GIS initiatives, and the soon-to-launch Land Trust Days program.

These partnerships are a reminder that strong conservation work is accomplished not only on the lands we protect, but through trust, generosity, and friendships that strengthen our work in lasting ways.



*Andrea, Mike, and Cynthia at Land Trust Alliance Advocacy Days. Photo provided by ILPA.*

# Central Indiana Land Trust

## *Saving Broken Cliff, Habitat for a Rare Plant*

In 2025, Central Indiana Land Trust, Inc. (CILTI) achieved a near-decade-long goal of protecting Broken Cliff. The 2.6-acre site lies above Clifty Creek in Bartholomew County.

The property is named for the broken limestone cliff that rolled down the bluff like tumbling dice. That created the perfect habitat for a species that is vanishingly rare. Spreading rock cress (*Arabis patens*) covers the honeycomb surface of that broken limestone.

*Arabis patens* clings to rocky outcrops, growing no more than two feet tall. It is found only in a few remaining places across the eastern United States. A native plant in the mustard family, it's listed as globally rare, critically imperiled, and endangered in Indiana.

The species appears especially vulnerable to habitat degradation. It requires xeric soil (soil with low moisture content) on limestone bluffs and other calcareous substrates. With such narrow habitat requirements, the plant faces multiple threats. Rock climbing, invasive encroachment, and river scour have all played a part in its decline.

Sadly, spreading rock cress is completely gone from some thirty sites that historically hosted the plant. That makes this white-flowered mustard—and its habitat—even more precious, especially since Broken Cliff hosts it in such high numbers, with 5,000 to 10,000 estimated examples.

The risk of losing this rare plant community was great. Broken Cliff's creekside location made it an attractive recreational site. Owned by the Indiana Department of Transportation, the land could easily have been auctioned off to the highest bidder.



CILTI first pursued acquiring it as a non-marketable mitigation site, starting in 2016, but the land didn't qualify for that program. In June of 2020, staff took up the quest again, contacting an Indiana Department of Transportation official to express interest.

Numerous state statutes and agency policies, coupled with social distancing and other pandemic-related issues, slowed the progress. But five years of diligent work with conservation partners paid off when INDOT officially offered to sell the site to CILTI.

Those partners included the Indiana DNR Division of Nature Preserves, as Scott Namesnik, state botanist, helped inventory the plant community to demonstrate the properties importance. CILTI then worked with key allies at INDOT to purchase the parcel.

Broken Cliff may be small in acreage, but it represents a huge win for conservation, with a whole team of people behind it.

The purchase was made possible by donors to CILTI's Evergreen Fund for Nature.

*Images: Arabis patens in bloom (top); CILTI Executive Director, Cliff Chapman examines this rare plant in its natural environment (bottom). Photos provided by CILTI.*

Central Indiana Land Trust preserves the best of Central Indiana's natural areas, protecting plants and animals, so Hoosiers can experience the wonder of the state's natural heritage.



# Archaeological Research Institute

## *Conserving Cummings Mound*

The Archaeological Research Institute (ARI), located in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supported by a dedicated local community and board of directors who are committed to advancing its mission to educate current and future generations about past cultures through the investigation, identification, and preservation of both Native and non-Native archaeological sites. This commitment to preservation, public education, and community partnership over the past seven years helped make ARI's most recent land acquisition possible.

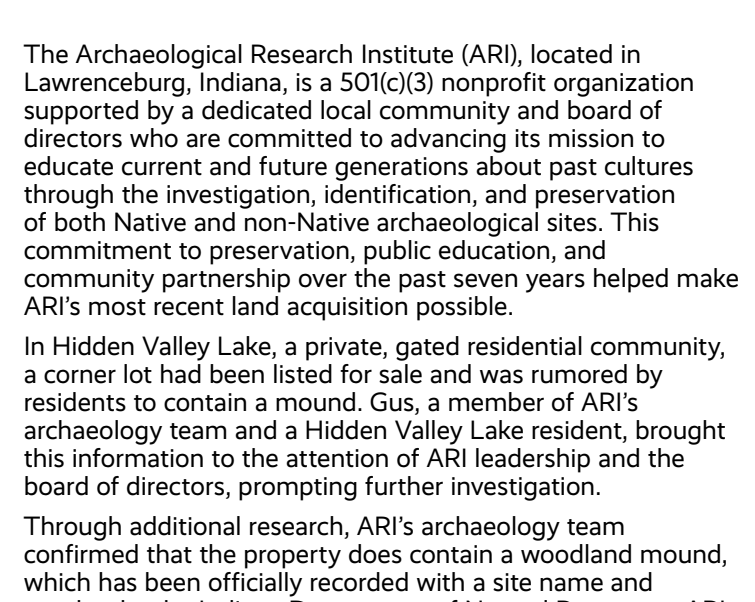
In Hidden Valley Lake, a private, gated residential community, a corner lot had been listed for sale and was rumored by residents to contain a mound. Gus, a member of ARI's archaeology team and a Hidden Valley Lake resident, brought this information to the attention of ARI leadership and the board of directors, prompting further investigation.

Through additional research, ARI's archaeology team confirmed that the property does contain a woodland mound, which has been officially recorded with a site name and number by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. ARI was able to negotiate with the property owners to place the site under contract and, with the support of board donations, complete the purchase. Now formally known as the Cummings Mound, the site is under ARI's stewardship, and efforts to clean and preserve this important cultural resource are already underway.

ARI's Land Stewardship team has been leading cleanup days to address years of overgrowth caused by invasive species such as honeysuckle and Callery pear. With the help of Ivy Tech students and other community volunteers, the site is beginning to receive the care and attention it has long needed.



*Images: Before invasive species removal (top); Volunteers help at a cleanup day (bottom left); After invasive species removal, a survey is in progress (bottom right). Photos provided by ARI.*



The Cummings Mound is also beginning to serve as an educational resource. Students from Cincinnati State Technical and Community College have been surveying the site as part of their capstone project, gaining valuable real-world experience working with ARI as a client. The survey data will help guide the next phase of the project, including the construction of a protective fence and walking path. These improvements will help safeguard the site while creating opportunities to share this important cultural resource with the broader community and Hidden Valley Lake residents.



Archaeological Research Institute educates current and future generations about past cultures through the investigation, identification, and preservation of both Native and non-Native archaeological sites.





## LC Nature Park

### Making a Home for Megafauna

In 2022, the opportunity arose for LC Nature Park to acquire 106 acres of farm ground adjacent to the existing park. The expansion of the park was a dream of the board and staff, growing the area protected and providing additional habitat for the bison and elk herds. The only problem was that the organization, only two years old at the time, was limited on funds to purchase the property.

As luck would have it, the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT) was created in 2022, distributing \$25 million appropriated by the General Assembly. The largest single infusion of state dollars into conservation in Indiana's history, the NLCT provided funding for land conservation projects on the condition that the Indiana Department of Natural Resources would place a conservation easement on the property. LC Nature Park was able to leverage the funds from NLCT to raise matching funds and stewardship restoration dollars to purchase and restore the property.

It took a number of years to get the project across the finish line, finally closing the transaction in 2025. LC Nature Park is the only place in Indiana with free-roaming bison and elk herds. The standard NLCT easement language does not allow for agricultural grazing, fencing, vehicle trails, and haying. This infrastructure and activities are a big part of how the park takes care of these native grazers. Working with the Indiana DNR, the park was able to find compromises that allow for the bison and elk to return to this property once it has been turned back into native habitat.

Images: A young bison calf looks out from amongst wildflowers (top); Penstemon blooms in the prairie (bottom).



LC Nature Park has a long-range Master Plan to fence in 60-70 acres of upland prairie for the bison and elk herds, open trails through the new oak-hickory savanna, and restore wetland habitat along the river on this property. The land also provided an opportunity to work with the land owners of the next parcel over, which the park has now partly acquired. The NLCT program was essential in being able to grow the park from just over 200 acres to the 450 acres it is now in just a handful of years. Without this program, a young land trust like LC Nature Park would not have been able to realize the dream of protecting and restoring this portion of the Little River Valley.



Photo by Kelly Borgmann

LC Nature Park cultivates a sense of awe and curiosity about our natural environment by providing immersive experiences, educational opportunities, and lively gatherings that create connection and inspire a commitment to conservation.

Photo by James Taylor



Photo by Scott Frosch

## Indiana Karst Conservancy

### Cave Census is a Real Win

Indiana's only cavefish is creamy white, eyeless, and 2-3 inches long. It inhabits the dark stream passages of caves in only 6 Indiana counties, which is its entire known range. In 2025, Indiana Karst Conservancy (IKC) had the opportunity to complete a population study of this state-endangered species at Hamer Cave, which is in Spring Mill State Park in Lawrence County.

IKC Board Member Tom Sollman has been doing inventories of these cavefish for over 30 years and calls the Spring Mill State Park area "The Cavefish Capitol of Indiana." IKC applied for and was selected to complete the Population Status of the Hoosier Cavefish project, and Tom was excited to include Hamer Cave in the regional counts. The cave entrance is owned by Heidelberg Materials, and through the company's Quarry Life Award initiative, Tom conducted multiple visits and was able to establish a baseline population of the cavefish, along with baselines for other cave fauna, such as ghost crayfish, cave spring crayfish, cave salamanders, pickerel frogs, and three species of bats.

As outreach for the project, IKC conducted a surface tour of the area for the company's Midwest interns, a surface tour and cave trip for North America and international staff, and another surface tour for one of the managing board members from Heidelberg, Germany. IKC concluded their outreach with a public field tour in November. This project was a great start to an ongoing relationship with the company, and further opportunities for partnership are expected in the future.

IKC was excited the project attracted the attention of the International Quarry Life Award jury, and in November, it was one of seven projects globally to win a cash award at the ceremony in Heidelberg, Germany. While the main objectives of the project were to census the cavefish and develop a relationship with Heidelberg Materials, the 10,000-euro award was an unexpected, but much appreciated, surprise. The funds will be used to purchase more land to protect caves and karst in Indiana.

Images: Hoosier Cavefish (*Amblyopsis hoosieri*) resting in an underground stream (top); Tom Sollman completing cavefish census work in Hamer Cave (middle); Group of Heidelberg Materials staff heading into Hamer Cave with researcher Tom Sollman (bottom).



Photo by Chris Schotter



Photo by Keith Dunlap

Indiana Karst Conservancy is dedicated to the active conservation and preservation of caves and karst features primarily in the two southern Indiana karst regions, encompassing 18 counties.



## The Nature Conservancy

*Douglas Woods and Fish Creek:  
A Community in Action*

In 2025, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Indiana acquired 265 acres in Steuben County, expanding its Douglas Woods Nature Preserve and advancing long-term efforts to protect Fish Creek, one of the most biologically diverse streams in the Great Lakes region. This new tract brings TNC closer to connecting two disjunct sections of the preserve, ensuring a large, connected forest remains intact for rare and endangered species to move over land and within Fish Creek while also improving the creek's water quality. Today, 1,635 acres are permanently protected at Douglas Woods Nature Preserve.

TNC's work to protect Fish Creek began more than 30 years ago with an original purchase of 221 acres that became known as Douglas Woods.

From the start, TNC knew that it needed to work with the community to implement a variety of conservation practices to reduce soil erosion into Fish Creek. Building relationships with farmers, and with the help of private, state, and federal funders, TNC provided partner programs to assist landowners to plant more trees, adopt conservation tillage, utilize cover crops and restore wetlands. Since then, water quality in Fish Creek continues to improve.

"Improvements to Fish Creek wouldn't have happened without the community's direct involvement," said Nathan Herbert, Northeast Indiana Conservation Land Manager for TNC. "Clean water benefits everyone, not just the organisms that live in it but also the communities downstream."

Fish Creek is home to an exceptional variety of freshwater mussels, one of the most imperiled animal groups on Earth. Mussels act as natural water filters -- one mussel can filter up to 15 gallons of water per day -- helping keep waterways clean for wildlife and people.

*Image: Conservation Land Manager  
Nathan Herbert looks across Fish Creek  
at Douglas Woods Nature Preserve.  
Photo by Fauna Creative*



In 2009, TNC began a significant wetland habitat restoration at Douglas Woods. TNC sought to rebuild the forested landscape and restore the wetlands that were here 150 years ago. The restoration aimed to protect water quality in Fish Creek and increase habitat for species that need a mix of upland forest and wetlands to survive.

Many years (and more than 400,000 trees) later, most of the active restoration is complete at Douglas Woods. The trees TNC planted were selected to match the surrounding forests. The restored wetlands are fully vegetated with diverse native sedges, rushes and aquatic plants. Invasive species have minimal presence, the sign of a resilient landscape.

### Visitor Improvements Begin in 2025

To raise awareness of the conservation successes at Douglas Woods, TNC has been working on improving accessibility and visitor engagement at the site. Once again working with the local community, TNC sought input on what features were important to highlight at Douglas Woods.

Improvements include an enlarged parking area with accessible parking, a welcoming area and new signage. In 2025, work began on a new two-mile trail—the Wood Thrush Way—which winds through the preserve's wetlands, mature forests and tree plantations. The first tenth of a mile of the trail is compacted gravel, so it is wheelchair and stroller accessible. The trail will include two overlooks with accessible viewing platforms and benches so visitors can stop and enjoy the sights and sounds of one of the preserve's wetlands, a testament to the power of place and perseverance.

The Nature Conservancy conserves the lands and waters on which all life depends, working to create a world where people and nature can thrive.



*Photo provided by GRCLT*

## George Rogers Clark Land Trust

### *Advancing Farmland Protection Through USDA Agricultural Land Easement Program*

George Rogers Clark Land Trust (GRCLT) continues to build on its long-standing commitment to farmland preservation by partnering with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Program to protect working farms and vital natural resources across the region.

In 2025, GRCLT successfully closed on the Loudon Farms Agricultural Land Easement, marking a significant milestone for both the organization and the community. The 150-acre property, located near the Blue River, has remained in the Loudon family for more than 200 years. By securing the easement, GRCLT ensured that this historic farmland will remain in agricultural use for generations to come.

The Loudon property holds added environmental significance due to its proximity to the Blue River, which provides critical habitat for the endangered Hellbender Salamander. Protecting farmland along this corridor not only sustains local agriculture but also helps safeguard sensitive ecosystems and water quality.

Building on this success, GRCLT is currently working to protect an additional 309 acres adjacent to the Loudon property, a scenic and productive farm owned by Dale and Nina Rothrock. This easement will add to the growing network of protected agricultural lands while supporting the Rothrocks' commitment to keeping their farm in active production, further strengthening the conservation impact along the Blue River watershed. This expansion reflects a strategic approach to preserving contiguous farmland and enhancing habitat protection.

In addition, the GRCLT Board is advancing efforts to secure another agricultural easement through the USDA program on the Martin property along Indian Creek in Harrison County.

This project represents yet another opportunity to conserve farmland, protect waterways, and reinforce the rural character of the region.

Through these ongoing initiatives, GRCLT continues to demonstrate how partnerships with landowners and federal conservation programs can protect farmland, preserve natural habitats, and sustain local agricultural economies. Each easement strengthens the Land Trust's mission to balance conservation with working landscapes—ensuring that farms, families, and ecosystems can thrive together well into the future.



*Photo by Zachary Cody*

George Rogers Clark Land Trust preserves and protects the working lands and rural character of Southern Indiana for now and into the future.



# Red-tail Land Conservancy

## A Partnership in Flight

Successful partnerships allow organizations to accomplish great things. Built on shared values, they are a journey of continuous collaboration -- not a one-time event -- that unlocks new opportunities for growth. This is the story of the partnership between Red-tail Land Conservancy (RLC) and the Robert Cooper Audubon Society (RCAS) in east central Indiana. From Red-tail's founding by a group of citizens concerned about habitat loss and the lack of land preservation, RCAS's membership has played a pivotal role in growing Red-tail's mission.

With overlapping service areas and closely aligned missions, working together is a natural fit. RCAS provides birdwatching field trips for the community at Red-tail Nature Preserve and other public RLC properties. Equipped with spotting scopes and loaner binoculars, RCAS and RLC held their first youth birding hike in 2025, and helped families and curious children experience the wonder of spring migration firsthand.

The partnership's roots go back nearly two decades. Over 15 years ago, RCAS helped raise funds to purchase a rare wetland fen adjacent to one of Red-tail's early public preserves, and installed an osprey nesting platform. Adjacent to Prairie Creek Reservoir, a seemingly perfect home for the birds, it took over ten years for the osprey to find it. When a pair of osprey finally chose to nest there, the platform had begun to show signs of rot. RCAS members contacted the local electric company, whose crew volunteered their bucket truck to make the necessary structural repairs. That pair of osprey has since returned to successfully raise four clutches of young.

When Red-tail put out the call for volunteers to adopt a preserve and become site stewards, RCAS stepped up and adopted Dutro-Ernst Woods. This urban preserve features a restored prairie and woodland, and RCAS members visit regularly to report issues, collect trash, remove invasive plants, and enjoy birdwatching. Three years ago, they installed bluebird boxes and have been cleaning and monitoring them throughout each season ever since.



Youth birding hike. | Photo by Matt Howell

Keenly aware of declining bird populations, RCAS members work closely with Red-tail's stewardship team to identify habitats where targeted projects can make the greatest impact. In 2025, RCAS proposed installing an American Kestrel nesting box at Reber Woods, a preserve with a mix of prairie and mature woodland that provides ideal kestrel habitat. RCAS raised the funds, built the box, and trained volunteers to monitor it. The project has since become a powerful tool for raising awareness about these remarkable raptors and the habitats they depend on.

The collaboration shows no signs of slowing down. RCAS has now raised funds to build a Chimney Swift tower at Dutro-Ernst Woods. Together, the two organizations are working on siting the tower and designing educational signage. Like every project before it, this latest effort will support bird populations while helping the community understand the vital connection between habitat conservation and wildlife.

Together, Red-tail and RCAS prove that conservation is the work of communities, not just organizations. Every bluebird box monitored, every child who spots their first warbler, and every osprey that returns to nest reflects what is possible when people show up for the places they love, and with more projects already taking shape, the best may still be ahead.



Osprey family. | Photo by Krista Wagner

Red-tail Land Conservancy protects and restores land in East Central Indiana while engaging their community with nature and conservation.



Volunteers install a kestrel nesting box. | Photo provided by Red-tail Land Conservancy



# Buffalo Trace Land Trust

## Bringing Back the Fire

Here in Indiana, fire is one of the most important tools for managing landscapes. From the plains in the North to the hills in the South, many ecosystems and associated plant and animal species are adapted to periodic fire. Historically, fire helped maintain open woodlands, prairies, and glades by limiting the growth of shade-tolerant species and recycling nutrients back into the soil.

Over time, these natural processes have changed. For generations, indigenous peoples intentionally used fire to manage the land, supporting wildlife habitat and food systems in ways that were both sophisticated and sustainable. However, over the last century, landscape fires have been largely suppressed. Other forms of disturbance, such as grazing from bison and elk or movements of the immense flocks of passenger pigeons that once shaped forest structure are no longer present. All the while, land use patterns and the global climate have changed significantly. Knowledge of the land's history provides conservationists with a benchmark toward which they can work in restoration projects.

Many land trusts engaged in landscape restoration recognize that historical conditions cannot be fully recreated. However, fire can still be reintroduced as a practical and powerful management tool. Every property has its own unique characteristics, including special terrain features, vegetation, nearby development, and management goals which require careful planning and a tailored approach to fire management. As a result, prescribed fire is practiced in many different ways across the state.

Some organizations, like The Nature Conservancy, carry out large-scale, coordinated fires on thousands of acres annually on lands like Buffalo Trace Land Trust's Stoler Creek property. Federal and state agencies maintain dedicated fire crews to manage public lands, and smaller land trusts often take a collaborative approach, pooling staff, equipment, and trained volunteers to conduct burns safely and effectively despite limited resources.

One more emerging and promising model is the use of Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs). These groups bring landowners together to share knowledge, equipment, and labor. Nearby states, such as Missouri and Illinois, are already effectively using PBAs to expand capacity and educational opportunities while sharing resources. Recent legislation in Indiana now supports certified prescribed burn managers in working with PBAs, helping address liability concerns and expand capacity. Efforts are already underway to organize regional networks that can provide training, equipment, and coordination among land trusts and private landowners. One way to connect and get more information is to attend the upcoming Fire in Eastern Oak Forests Conference in Bloomington this June.

As the future is increasingly shaped by climate change, increased development, and greater wildfire risk, collaboration will be essential. Prescribed fire offers not only a proven ecological tool, but also an opportunity to build community, share responsibility, and steward the land more effectively.



Images: A prescribed fire burns low and slow through a woodland, maximizing safety while clearing out duff and unwanted species and making the forest healthier overall (top); TNC, BTLT, and volunteers work together on prescribed burns like this one at Stoler Creek (bottom). Photos provided by BTLT.



Buffalo Trace Land Trust works with landowners and partners to conserve natural habitats, preserve land, and enhance the ecosystem in Southern Indiana for all to enjoy.

# ACRES Land Trust

*Stewards Listen to the Land*



# Little River Wetlands Project

*Citizen Science Partnerships at Eagle Marsh and Beyond*



In 2024, ACRES received a bequest from the estate of Barbara Armstrong, with the desire that a portion of the funds be used for wildlife research. A few options came to mind, though the one that rose to the top was to use the funds to purchase a pair of ultrasonic and acoustic recording devices. When outfitted correctly, these devices can record birds, bats, frogs, and insects simultaneously. Paired with a solar panel, these devices can run continuously for months, with the only limiting factor being the SD card's storage capacity.

ACRES' stewardship team was first introduced to the capabilities of these devices in 2023 when researchers from the Indiana DNR worked together across the state to collect data on bat species distributions and abundance. To form a complete picture of the status of the several bat species that frequent northeastern Indiana, it was necessary for the DNR to place these recording devices within private property, and that's where ACRES came in. When reviewing the data and learning more about the devices, it became clear how valuable these devices could be to the land trust.

In the spring of 2025, ACRES deployed two ultrasonic and acoustic recording devices at its Quog Lake Nature Preserve in LaGrange County. Once installed, these devices required no upkeep and continuously listened and recorded when triggered. In total, they recorded more than 1,700 hours of wildlife sounds, mostly birds, bats, and frogs, with occasional insects and chipmunks.

Some recordings require further analysis, though it is safe to say that more than 160 bird species visited the property throughout the spring, summer, and early fall of 2025, of which 22 were either state-endangered or species of special concern. Eight bat species were recorded, with 4 state-endangered and 3 species of special concern. The species lists compiled from these devices have provided us with a baseline for comparison going forward. ACRES plans to continue moving these devices between its conservation priority areas over the next several years and to return them to the areas previously monitored every 5 years.

A consistent monitoring program is at the heart of how Little River Wetlands Project (LRWP) stewards the land. Over time, LRWP tracks changes across preserves that guide their management strategies. LRWP does this in three ways: conducting periodic bioinventories, maintaining a robust community science program, and encouraging visitors to record data on the iNaturalist website. Together, these efforts provide a picture of the health of these ecosystems.

At the end of May this past year, Little River Wetlands Project hosted a bioinventory at Eagle Marsh, LRWP's largest wetland preserve at over 800 acres. Scientists from across the state and the country came to the marsh to survey as many species as possible over a 24-hour period. This was a follow-up study to one conducted a decade earlier. The data, which is still being compiled and compared, will help inform the management of the preserve. Further, it will allow stewards to see how changes in hydrology have affected animal and plant communities over the past decade. LRWP is hoping it might even lead to the discovery of species that have never been spotted there before!

Community science projects offer volunteers an opportunity to contribute to a land trust's understanding of the preserves. The data they collect, in addition to their own reference, is submitted to various universities and national/international organizations, which use the findings to promote the protection of sensitive species inhabiting natural areas. In 2025, LRWP volunteers logged over 700 hours monitoring.

One particularly impactful partnership is LRWP's collaboration with scientists and students at Purdue Fort Wayne, which coordinates turtle surveys on several water bodies across their properties. This year, volunteers and students captured 78 turtles, a notable increase compared to the previous year's surveys.

To conserve the now-threatened Monarch butterfly, volunteers monitor numbers across all life stages, and also record all sightings of Milkweed, its host plant, along the trails. In 2025, LRWP monitors recorded a 150% increase in the adult Monarch butterfly population on the preserves!

LRWP also engages volunteers in a broader study of Lepidoptera life in the marsh. They use the Michigan Butterfly Network to train volunteers to identify and record every butterfly species seen at the preserve. In 2025, volunteers spotted 39 species and recorded over 2,500 butterfly sightings, a 75% increase over the prior year.

There are also 35 nest boxes and six bat boxes spread throughout Eagle Marsh and Arrowhead preserves. Monitors will check these weekly from spring to summer. Last year, they recorded 32 nests and 62 birds fledged from those boxes, an 8% increase over last year. In addition, a certified Hoosier Riverwatch instructor takes groups out to 4 different tributaries of Eagle Marsh to perform water quality testing, with results submitted to IDEM.

Finally, LRWP monitors species through iNaturalist. By capturing and uploading photos of flora and fauna on their phones, visitors can turn their observations into research-grade findings. Presently, there are over 5,800 observations within Eagle Marsh alone, providing an abundance of information to support their stewardship and education efforts.

Monitoring is a critical part of evaluating the progress of stewardship efforts. Over time, these observations reveal trends, highlight successes, and signal to us when management strategies need to change. This work is only made possible because of LRWP's dedicated volunteer network, made up of people who care enough to give their time to this critical task.



Images: Turtle survey (top); Bioblitz (bottom). Photos provided by LRWP.



Images: Looking across Quog Lake, photo by Ivan LaBianca, The Conservation Fund (top); A birds-eye view of the nature preserve, photo provided by ACRES Land Trust (bottom).



ACRES Land Trust owns and protects natural and working lands, inspiring people to value, appreciate, and support these places for the benefit of all - today and forever.

Little River Wetlands Project restores and protects the wetlands in the historic watershed of the Little River, a major tributary of the Wabash River.

# Sycamore Land Trust

## Scientific Monitoring Guides Habitat Restoration in Southern Indiana

When Sycamore Land Trust acquires a piece of land, the work to protect it has only just begun. Across more than 150 protected properties in southern Indiana, Sycamore stewards forests, wetlands, grasslands, and streams with the goal of sustaining the rich diversity of life they support.

Caring for land well means paying close attention to how it is functioning. To guide habitat restoration, Sycamore partners with local scientists and researchers to better understand the ecological communities on its preserves and how they respond to stewardship. In partnership with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Sycamore's land stewardship team is using coverboards to survey the reptiles and amphibians that shelter under them, whose presence can offer important clues about habitat quality. Marsh bird surveys are documenting state-endangered species like the Virginia rail using newly restored wetlands. An ongoing research project funded by the Indianapolis Zoological Society has enabled Sycamore to monitor endangered Kirtland's snakes and the very rare cypress firefly, which is protected at Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve, one of only two known locations for the species in Indiana.

Scientific research helps Sycamore identify conservation priorities, measure the results of restoration, and highlight how land trusts can support threatened species that depend on the habitats they manage.

In 2025, Sycamore launched three new scientific research projects to help answer those questions. They partnered with Indiana DNR's nongame aquatics team in September to survey freshwater mussels at several preserves along Beanblossom Creek in Monroe County. Because mussels are highly sensitive to pollution, erosion, and habitat disturbance, they can provide important information about aquatic ecosystem health.

The team documented living individuals of 14 species of freshwater mussels across the surveyed preserves, along with evidence of reproduction for most species. One discovery was especially remarkable: a bed of 529 pistolgrip mussels, one of the largest documented populations of that species in Indiana. Finding a population of that size suggests that the stream has stable banks, clean water, and thriving populations of catfish, the host fish pistolgrips depend on for reproduction.

Healthy mussel communities point to healthy streams, and healthy streams are shaped by what is happening on the surrounding land. Forested streambanks, reduced erosion, intact floodplains, and careful land stewardship all contribute to the conditions mussels depend on.



Photo by Wyatt Downey



Photo by Noah Johnson

At the Sam Shine Foundation Preserve in Monroe County, Sycamore has been restoring wetlands and adjacent grasslands on former agricultural land, rebuilding habitats that have become increasingly rare across Indiana. That restoration work created an exciting opportunity in the summer of 2025, when Sycamore partnered with the Indiana DNR State Herpetology Program and Wildlife Health Program to support one of Indiana's most imperiled amphibians: the state-endangered crayfish frog.

Crayfish frogs have very specific habitat needs. They breed in shallow seasonal wetlands but spend most of the year in nearby grasslands, sheltering underground in crayfish burrows. To support them, a landscape has to offer both breeding wetlands and open upland habitat close enough together for the frogs to complete their life cycle.

At Shine, newly restored shallow wetlands now hold water seasonally, creating the temporary pools crayfish frogs need for breeding. Surrounding restored grasslands provide the open habitat and burrow-rich soils the species depends on after the breeding season.

Indiana DNR partnered with Sycamore to release 606 crayfish frog metamorphs and 2,000 to 3,000 tadpoles into these restored wetlands in hopes of establishing a new population. Crayfish frogs take two to three years to reach maturity, so a sign of success will be hearing their snore-like mating call in the spring of 2027 or 2028, a sound that has not been heard along Beanblossom Creek for decades.

In 2025, Sycamore's land stewardship team launched a pilot project using radio telemetry to monitor how eastern box turtles move across its preserves. Eastern box turtles are a species of special concern in Indiana, vulnerable to habitat fragmentation and roads. Because they are long-lived, slow to mature, and move relatively short distances, even small disruptions to their landscape can have lasting effects.

Four turtles affectionately nicknamed Dolly, Walden, Bonnie, and Clyde were fitted with harmless radio transmitters to track their movements and habitat preferences at Sycamore's Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill in Brown County. The tags were painted brown to help the turtles remain camouflaged. Each eastern box turtle has a unique shell pattern, almost like a thumbprint, which makes it possible to identify individuals quickly and release them with minimal handling.

The data collected is building the foundation for a long-term study that will help shape habitat management across Sycamore's preserves and inform restoration work in ways that minimize impacts on native species.

Scientific research is helping Sycamore measure the ecological health of the preserves in its care and use that knowledge to guide the work ahead. The findings will help inform how land trusts across Indiana use stewardship tools like prescribed fire, invasive species removal, and native plantings to protect habitat, while gaining a better understanding of what these places need to remain healthy, resilient, and full of life.



Photo by Chris Fox

Images: Releasing crayfish frog tadpoles (top left); A crayfish frog metamorph found an appropriate burrow (bottom); Land stewardship interns Wyatt Downey and Lindsay Levine hold Dolly after her harness is fitted at Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill (top right).



Sycamore Land Trust preserves the beauty, health, and diversity of southern Indiana's natural landscape through strategic land conservation and environmental education.

### Indiana Bioinventory Grants

Indiana Land Protection Alliance has partnered with the Indiana Academy of Science since 2023 to connect taxonomic specialists with Indiana land stewards and to provide small grants for qualified bioinventory projects. In 2025, we were excited to welcome Indiana Native Plant Society to our partnership.

Since the inception of the program, 17 projects have been funded at 16 preserves, focused on vascular plants, insects and spiders, birds, mussels, and bees.

Project proposals are reviewed by the Biodiversity and Natural Areas Committee in March and September.

Learn more at [protectindianaland.org/in-bioinventory](https://protectindianaland.org/in-bioinventory).

**\$59,200** contributed to bioinventory projects



Indiana Native Plant Society

## Ouabache Land Conservancy

### Connecting the Wabash Valley to a Global Migration Network

High above the Wabash River, something remarkable is happening, though you'd never hear it with your own ears.

Invisible signals are passing through the sky, carried by birds no larger than a sparrow and bats navigating the night. Each one is part of a journey that spans hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles. And now, those journeys are being recorded right here in west-central Indiana.

After nearly a year of planning, partnership-building, and hands-on work, Ouabache Land Conservancy (OLC) has successfully installed and activated a Motus Wildlife Tracking System tower at Atherton Island Natural Area. What began with an exploratory site visit in April 2025 has culminated in a fully operational station contributing to an international network that tracks the movement of wildlife.

For OLC, this project represents an important evolution in its conservation work. While land trusts are known for protecting land, long-term impact means understanding how wildlife uses protected landscapes. The Motus tower reinforces active monitoring and scientific contribution.

Motus—Latin for “movement”—is a collaborative research network that relies on automated radio telemetry stations to detect signals from tiny transmitters placed on wildlife. By filling a critical geographic gap along a major migratory pathway, the Wabash River corridor, OLC's tower strengthens a growing system of stations that allow scientists to map migration routes, identify key habitats, and inform conservation decisions across the region.

This project was made possible through partnership with the Sam Shine Foundation, whose funding and technical support helped bring the vision to life. Volunteers, board members, and several partners also contributed every step of the way—from early planning conversations to constructing the tower's foundation, wiring, and antenna system.

The year-long process reflects the collaborative, community-driven nature of land conservation. Volunteers braved challenging conditions, hand-mixed thousands of pounds of concrete, installed grounding systems, participated in technical workshops to assemble key components, and more.

Now operational, the tower “listens” to the skies, detecting tagged wildlife passing through the region. The data it collects will help answer questions about migration and habitat use, strengthening the scientific foundation for future conservation.

The Motus tower is more than infrastructure for OLC. It is a signal of growth, demonstrating how a small land trust can contribute not only to protecting land, but to advancing the knowledge needed to steward it for generations to come.

Ouabache Land Conservancy protects and restores land in west-central Indiana by providing habitat for native species, maintaining natural scenic beauty, and improving water and air quality, while offering education and enhancing the quality of life in our communities for future generations.



Images: Volunteers gather in front of the completed tower (top); Indiana DNR staff members Allisyn-Marie Gillet, State Ornithologist, and Rachelle Lange, Avian Technology Coordinator came to Atherton Island Natural Area for a site visit to survey for suitable locations on the property for the Motus tower (bottom). Photos provided by OLC.

## Blue Heron Ministries

### Restoring Open Landscapes for Marsh Hawks at Nasby Fen



Nasby Fen is the largest prairie fen complex in Indiana and a cornerstone of the 12,000-acre Pigeon River Fish and Wildlife Area. The preserve supports exceptional biodiversity, including numerous state-listed species and a federally threatened species, and its protection directly advances priorities identified in Indiana's State Wildlife Action Plan.

At this nature preserve in northeastern Indiana, a large scale restoration effort is strengthening one of the state's most significant wetland and grassland landscapes. Supported by a Sustain Our Great Lakes grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the ecological restoration project was initiated by Blue Heron Ministries and is currently coordinated and implemented in partnership with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Building on more than two decades of collaborative conservation work, the current project expands restoration across a contiguous 235-acre landscape of prairie fen, sedge meadow, prairie, and oak savanna. Ongoing management continues on 84 acres of high quality protected habitat, while 151 acres of previously degraded wetlands and uplands are being actively restored. Restoration strategies focus on invasive species control, hydrologic restoration, prescribed fire, and native seeding to improve habitat connectivity and long-term ecological resilience.

These efforts are designed to deliver measurable conservation outcomes. By restoring native plant communities and

groundwater-fed wetland hydrology, the project is creating large grassland habitats that benefit a wide range of wildlife including migratory waterfowl, pollinators, reptiles, and grassland birds. Of particular importance is the state endangered Northern Harrier, also known as the Marsh Hawk, which depends on expansive, open landscapes for nesting and foraging. Prairie fens and oak savannas are also inherently climate resilient systems, providing refuge for both cold- and warm-adapted species.

Restoration activities began in March 2025 and are progressing in phases. Initial work included removal of undesirable trees while retaining oak and hickory, invasive herbaceous plant control, closure of an abandoned gravel pit, and prescribed fire in upland prairie-oak savanna areas. Additional herbicide treatments, hydrologic restoration through filling of 5,140 linear feet of excavated ditch, and large-scale native seeding of 108 acres of wetlands and uplands are planned to complete the restoration sequence.

Long-term stewardship is central to the project's success. Ongoing monitoring, adaptive management, prescribed fire, and invasive species control led by Indiana DNR staff and partners will ensure that restoration gains are sustained well into the future. Together, these efforts demonstrate how strategic land protection and restoration can safeguard Indiana's most ecologically valuable landscapes for wildlife and people alike.



Nasby Fen | Photo provided by Blue Heron Ministries  
Top: Northern Harrier | Photo by Kami Hall



Blue Heron Ministries builds communities where Creation is kept and keeps Creation so that community may be restored.

# Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy

## Restoration Begins at Borton Wetland

In 2025, the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy (CLTLC) embarked on a multi-year restoration project to restore 8 acres of oak barrens habitat and 4 acres of forested wetland habitat at Borton Wetland Nature Preserve. What's the final goal? A beautiful ecosystem with towering red oak trees, plentiful prairie and woodland wildflowers in various bloom cycles, and numerous birds and butterflies!

The project started as a preserve overrun with invasive shrubs, herbaceous plants and non-native trees. Looking closer, one could see the native oak trees, asters, golden rods, butterfly weed, wild bergamot, blue vervain, swamp milkweed, ironweed, partridge pea, and many other native, beneficial species. To restore this land to its full potential, a restoration plan was developed and put into action.

This first year of work involved the clearing and removal of invasive brush and non-native trees. By opening the canopy, the native flora community has been given space and light to begin thriving. Over the next couple of years, CLTLC will seed locally sourced native wildflower and grass seeds to improve and enhance the ecosystem. In the future, Borton Wetland Preserve will be a thriving environment that supports wildlife and pollinators, complete with a public trail to encourage community experiences in nature.



Images: Ironweed blooms in the prairie (top); Brush piles are all that remain of invasive shrubs after a workday (bottom left); Aerial of the wetland complex (bottom right). Photos provided by CLTLC.



Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy works to preserve, protect, and manage the natural environment within the Clear Lake watershed and Clear Lake Township for future generations.



Belted Kingfisher | Photo by Andrea Mynhier



Jessica and Sara spread the word about The Oxbow. Photo provided by Oxbow, Inc.

# Oxbow, Inc

## Growing Capacity for Protecting Floodplain Habitats

Oxbow, Inc. is a nonprofit land trust dedicated to the preservation, protection, and active management of a 1,600-acre floodplain wetland at the confluence of the Great Miami and Ohio Rivers near Lawrenceburg, Indiana. Shaped by annual flooding and historic river paths, this ecologically rich area serves as one of the most important migratory bird stopovers in the central Ohio Valley. It is a landscape rich in both environmental and historical significance.

Founded in 1985 after successfully opposing plans to build a 700-acre commercial barge shipping center on the floodplain, Oxbow, Inc. has made significant strides in land conservation. From hiring its first staff member in 2017 to acquiring an additional 435 acres that same year, the organization greatly expanded its protected lands—helping to create a more contiguous block of approximately 1,600 acres and strengthening its ability to protect and enhance this unique wetland habitat.

The year 2025 was a pivotal one, marked by a strong focus on organizational development to further advance Oxbow's mission.

After four decades of conservation work, Oxbow reached several major milestones. In April 2025, the organization welcomed its first-ever Executive Director, Sara Brandts. With over 15 years of experience in improving water quality across the Ohio River watershed, building partnerships, and advancing conservation efforts, Sara brought critical leadership and field expertise to the role. Her guidance is helping lead Oxbow into a new era with renewed energy and focus.

In August 2025, Oxbow also welcomed Director of Engagement Jessica Martini. This role was created to increase awareness, strengthen partnerships, and support the organization's operations. With a background in community engagement, project management, and education, Jessica has played a key role in elevating Oxbow's visibility and expanding its outreach.

To cap off the year, Oxbow hosted its 40th Anniversary Celebration Dinner, bringing together more than 115 donors, supporters, and community members. The event honored the organization's history while celebrating its future, marking an important moment of reflection and momentum.

Looking ahead, Oxbow remains committed to continued growth and impact. In spring 2026, the organization plans to hire a full-time Land Steward to further support habitat restoration and land management efforts at the Oxbow Nature Conservancy. While the organization continues to evolve, its mission remains unchanged. Oxbow moves forward with renewed momentum and a deep commitment to protecting this landscape for generations to come.



Oxbow, Inc. preserves, protects and improves the floodplain at the confluence of the Great Miami and Ohio Rivers.

# Wawasee Area Conservancy Foundation

*Partnering with Producers for Soil Health*



In an effort to create stronger and more inclusive relationships with the agricultural producers in the Wawasee Watershed, the Wawasee Area Conservancy Foundation (WACF) has reached out to the farming community to offer support for improving soil conditions and slowing soil erosion.

In 2025, WACF sponsored two farmer tours hosted by Russell Anderson, a conservation farmer in the Wawasee watershed. These tours, led by Russell and his son, featured explanations of Best Management Practices on their fields, cover crop schedules, soil types, equipment, techniques, and buffer strips.

In September 2025, a Soil Health Academy was hosted on Russell's farm. Academies are a collaborative initiative between WACF, Ecosystems Connections Institute, and the Soil Health Academy that promote regenerative farming. The Soil Health Academy is an organization committed to empowering regeneration through education; they help farmers understand and effectively apply nature's proven regenerative agriculture principles. Their mission is to cultivate healthier soil, food, farms, and communities for a healthier future.

In addition, the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in Noble and Kosciusko Counties have coordinated registrations for conservation practices included in the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) program, which supports farmers in their implementation of those practices with federal funding. Supported conservation practices include the planting of cover crops or buffer strips, nutrient management, gypsum application, tree planting, anaerobic digesters, pesticide management plan, soil testing, and manure transfer pipelines.

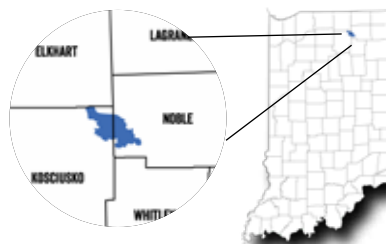
As summarized by Dr. Jerry Sweeten, co-founder of Ecosystems Connection Institute, "The social science of conservation cannot be understated. Building conservation partnerships across cultural differences is key to collaboration toward the common goal of improving farm sustainable productivity and profitability while protecting water quality in Lake Wawasee."

WACF attended the annual meetings for the SWCDs and gave a presentation in Noble County on their NWQI work. The organization also offers small farmer grants for conservation practices, and recently awarded two grants to fund the use of cover crops and culvert repairs.

WACF continues its work in the upper watershed agricultural areas, with a focus on improving water quality in streams and strengthening outreach to agricultural partners.



Images: Anderson farm tour (above); The Kosciusko County SWCD joined the Soil Health Academy event and demonstrated a rain simulator, showing erosion improvements with cover crops (bottom). Photos provided by WACF.



Wawasee Area Conservancy Foundation *protects and enhances water quality and natural attributes in the Wawasee Area Watershed through water-related land acquisition, educational programming, and scientifically-informed action to preserve the lakes for future generations.*

# Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D Land Trust

*Protecting Working Natural Lands*

Last year, Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D secured conservation easements on three significant properties across Indiana, advancing long-term efforts to protect natural habitats, safeguard water quality, and preserve the cultural and family histories rooted in the landscape. Together, these easements reflect a continued commitment to conserving working and natural lands in ways that honor both ecological value and local heritage, ensuring these places remain protected and meaningful for future generations.



Photo provided by Bill Fielding

## Johnson Leipsic Farm Orange County

Currently owned by Bill and Norma Fielding, the Johnson Leipsic Farm spans 201 acres in Orange County. The conservation easement was established to protect productive woodlands planted in the 1990s. These woodlands safeguard the headwaters of a stream flowing into Spring Mill State Park by protecting the watershed from agricultural runoff. The primary goal is to protect the Northern Blind Cave Fish inhabiting Spring Mill State Park.

## Don and Jean Musselman Property Miami County

This 53-acre property, owned by Don and Jean Musselman, features a beautiful woodland and river frontage along the Eel River. The Musselmans provide kayak and canoe access to the river from their farm, encouraging recreational use while preserving the landscape. Don Musselman has diligently documented the history of the property, which has been in his family for generations. His father, a veterinarian, operated his practice on the land, caring for horses and large animals. Don also believes that the property was once inhabited by Miami people due to its proximity to hunting, fishing, and trade routes near the river.



Photo provided by Wood-Land-Lakes

## Janel Rogers Property Whitley County

Owned by Janel Rogers, this 17-acre property in Whitley County has been in her family since the 1940s. Janel has focused on restoring wildlife habitat and planting native trees, plants, and shrubs. The acreage is adjacent to Big Cedar Lake and is dedicated to protecting the natural area from urban growth. Additionally, the property provides a location for environmental and non-profit groups to utilize the house and outbuildings, furthering educational and environmental objectives.



Photo by Janel Rogers



Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D Land Trust *specializes in collaborating with farm families and agriculture landowners to create conservation easements which preserve their farmland and farm businesses.*



## Shirley Heinze Land Trust

### *More Than Land: Building Bridges for Community Connection*

For Shirley Heinze Land Trust (SHLT), conservation has always been about “land and.” Land and creating spaces where all people belong. Land and a deep, inspired relationship to their home in northwestern Indiana. With the recent completion of major access improvements at three preserves in Lake, Porter, and St. Joseph Counties, SHLT has invested in years of community engagement and vision. The result is places that support ecological integrity and community life.

At Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve in Gary, access improvements were shaped directly by the needs and voices of the surrounding community. Located adjacent to West Side Leadership Academy, the only public high school in Gary, IN, and within a historically underserved neighborhood, the preserve holds a rare remnant dune and swale ecosystem alongside enormous potential for community impact. Through conversations with residents, educators, and partners, it became clear that physical barriers, such as the lack of a safe walking route and limited gathering space, were preventing people from fully experiencing what was right in their backyard.

By installing sidewalks connecting the school to the preserve, expanding the parking area, and creating accessible trail features, SHLT helped transform Ivanhoe South into a shared space. Boardwalks now cross the swales safely, lighting improves comfort, and a pavilion provides a place for students, families, and neighbors to gather. These improvements built trust and grew support by demonstrating SHLT’s commitment to inclusion, access, and long-term partnership. Today, Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve is better equipped to function as a hub for environmental education, outdoor learning, and community programming.



*Photo by Michael Gard*

*Images: Ribbon cutting celebration at Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve, photo provided by SHLT (top); The original preserve sign at Ivanhoe South (bottom).*



At Lydick Bog in St. Joseph County, improvements centered on balancing access with preservation. As one of the rarest wetland types in Indiana, the bog’s fragile ecosystem required careful planning. Visitors and supporters shared a desire to experience the landscape firsthand while ensuring it remained protected for future generations. The completion of the elevated boardwalk achieved that balance, allowing visitors to explore kettle lakes, wildflowers, and unique plants without disturbing sensitive habitats.

The addition of a pavilion further supports educational use, providing space for school groups, families, and volunteers to gather and learn. Neighbors also played a role in restoration efforts, helping to plant native species and reseed areas impacted by construction. These shared stewardship efforts have deepened community ownership of Lydick Bog, reinforcing the idea that conservation is a collective responsibility.

Together, these projects have reshaped both SHLT’s approach and how communities engage with conservation. The organization’s focus has expanded beyond land protection to include designing spaces that encourage learning, recreation, and connection. Improved accessibility has increased visitation, strengthened partnerships with schools and local organizations, and made it possible to offer more inclusive programming across all three preserves.

Most importantly, these investments have created places where people feel a sense of belonging, where nature is not unreachable, but integrated into daily life. By listening to community voices and responding with thoughtful, inclusive design, SHLT has demonstrated that conservation succeeds best when people are part of the story. Ivanhoe South, Meadowbrook, and Lydick Bog now stand as living examples of how access improvements can protect natural resources while uplifting the communities they serve.

A similar community-driven approach guided recent improvements at Meadowbrook Nature Preserve in Valparaiso. As Meadowbrook grew into one of SHLT’s most visited preserves, visitors expressed a desire for clearer navigation, gathering spaces, and opportunities to engage more deeply through programming. In response, SHLT invested in redesigned trail maps with intuitive loop systems, a new trailhead kiosk, and the addition of an amphitheater that nestles within the natural landscape.

Since its completion, the Meadowbrook Amphitheater has become a focal point for community life. Events ranging from family-friendly wildlife programs to live music and seasonal nature experiences have drawn hundreds of visitors. These gatherings have reinforced Meadowbrook as a welcoming place for all people. Importantly, the amphitheater has expanded SHLT’s ability to collaborate with educators, artists, musicians, and partner organizations, strengthening the organization’s role as a conservation leader and a community convener.



*Images: Guests hear from speakers at Meadowbrook Amphitheater ribbon cutting (top); The boardwalk brings bird watchers into the wetland at Lydick Bog Nature Preserve (bottom). Photos provided by SHLT.*



*Shirley Heinze Land Trust preserves and restores natural lands and waters in northwestern Indiana, and engages people in nature and conservation.*

## NICHES Land Trust

*30 Years Down, Forever to Go*

In 1994, a small group of committed conservationists gathered in a Purdue University conference room to compare notes and discuss what a land trust was, what it would take to start one, and whether such an organization would be useful in west-central Indiana. That conversation, sparked by a timely donation request from a landowning family and inspired by efforts to protect a cherished local wetland from a proposed development project, planted the seeds for what would become NICHES Land Trust.

From its official incorporation in 1995 to its public debut on Earth Day 1996, NICHES began as a modest and fully volunteer-led effort. Over the last three decades, that initial small group of organizers has grown into a thriving organization with over 1,000 members, 5,000+ acres of protected land, 8 staff, and a reputation as a regional leader in ecological stewardship.

In 2025, NICHES celebrated 30 years of protecting land, restoring habitats, and connecting communities to the ecosystems that define the region. This milestone was marked by significant expansions of NICHES volunteer, development, and outreach programs, as well as the construction of a new Stewardship Facility.

Over the course of 2025, volunteers came out in force to support an ambitious stewardship plan. They worked alongside staff to manage invasive species, collect seeds, clean more than 13 miles of local waterways, conduct 7 prescribed burns, and maintain over 15 miles of public hiking trails. In total, volunteers contributed more than 14,500 service hours, the most in NICHES history, and a quantity equivalent to 7 additional full-time staff members!

In 2025, NICHES drew on the passion, knowledge, and expertise of its staff and volunteers to deliver a full and engaging outreach calendar. In total, NICHES hosted over 30 different programs and events to celebrate 30 years of conservation. Highlights included a series of mindfulness hikes, woodcock walks, and creek stomps, as well as hands-on experiences like electrofishing, moth collection, and macroinvertebrate sampling. Summer nature camp offered



Images: Grand opening of the new Stewardship Facility (top); Volunteers show off a pile of garlic mustard (bottom left); Summer camp (bottom right). Photos provided by NICHES Land Trust.



three weeks of immersive exploration for young naturalists, while seasonal events showcased wildflowers, amphibians, and even allowed participants to smell and taste their local natural heritage through a spring maple sugaring festival and fall harvest presentation.

Support from the growing and dedicated conservation community has made possible one of the most significant achievements in NICHES history: the completion of a new, 6,000-square-foot Stewardship Facility in 2025. Located at NICHES Kickapoo Cliffs preserve in Warren County, the facility provides a centralized hub for equipment, operations, and outreach, greatly improving efficiency across the organization's 13-county service area. By reducing reliance on rented equipment and dispersed storage, NICHES can complete more stewardship work in-house while lowering long-term costs. Designed with sustainability in mind, the facility includes solar and heat pump systems and serves as a space to convene, train, and connect with the public.

Together, these achievements demonstrate that the organization is surrounded by a resilient and generous community capable of sustaining the organization's work in land protection, habitat restoration, and community outreach across the region for the next 30 years and beyond.



NICHES Land Trust protects, restores and sustains Northern Indiana's ecosystems by providing habitat for native species and offering natural places for the education, appreciation, and enjoyment of current and future generations.



## Cardinal Land Conservancy

*Joining Forces for the Land*

Cardinal Land Conservancy is excited to have joined forces with Oak Heritage Conservancy to ensure the protection of southeastern Indiana's natural heritage. The merger of the two land trusts was formally completed on October 30, 2025, with the transfer of all Oak Heritage assets to Cardinal.

While this is the end of an era for Oak Heritage Conservancy as a business entity, it is the beginning of a new chapter for conservation in southeast Indiana. By joining forces, Cardinal is creating a stronger, more resilient organization with the capacity to protect more land. Cardinal's vision for southeast Indiana is to protect the last great places; to focus on preserving and protecting climate resilient forests, meadows, grasslands, wetlands and waterways, as well as working with farmers to preserve important agricultural lands across the region.

Cardinal now protects 11,500 acres of natural, agricultural and open lands in 20 counties across southwestern Ohio and southeastern Indiana. Their Indiana holdings include 579 acres of conservation easements and 805 acres of fee simple owned natural areas. The largest Indiana preserve is the 147-acre Cook Property in Dearborn County that was acquired by Oak Heritage in 2025 with funding assistance through the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust, which is funded in part with contributions from the Indiana environmental license plate. This property is home to the rare blue ghost firefly (*Phausis reticulata*), which gets their name from the singular, long-lasting flash of males that can remain illuminated for up to a minute at a time.

Cardinal Land Conservancy was established just over a decade ago with the collaboration of three individual land trusts in southwestern Ohio. Beginning with one employee in 2015, Cardinal has now grown to 19 positions including the newly created Indiana Field Manager position. Later this year, Cardinal will be adding a second position in Indiana focusing on development.

In addition to preserving important natural areas, Cardinal is also committed to protecting working farms through agricultural easements. Whether purchased (often at a discounted rate) or donated, an easement ensures the land remains a farm forever -- it cannot be subdivided or developed. In recent years, Cardinal has sharpened its focus on Ecologically Sound Agriculture, prioritizing farms practicing regenerative agriculture or producing food for local consumption. Regenerative practices rebuild soil health, return carbon to the ground, and increase long-term productivity. Tools like cover crops, no-till planting, grassed waterways, and riparian buffers benefit farmers while also improving water quality, supporting wildlife, and strengthening the land.



Cook Property, Dearborn County | Photo by Jack Sutton



Hall-Carmer Wetlands, Jennings County | Photo by Jack Sutton



Cardinal Land Conservancy preserves natural habitats, waterways, agricultural lands and open space in Southwest Ohio and Southeast Indiana.



## Mud Creek Conservancy

### Creating Places for Biodiversity and Engagement

Mud Creek Conservancy is excited to share that they have once again been selected to participate in CreatINg Places, a program of the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA). Through this program, Mud Creek Conservancy (MCC) is eligible for a matching grant from IHCDA of up to \$50,000, but only if they first reach their fundraising goal. From April 1 through June 1, the community will have the opportunity to help bring Blue Heron Nature Preserve to life by visiting [BlueHeronNaturePreserve.com](http://BlueHeronNaturePreserve.com).

Just a few years ago, MCC partnered with IHCDA's CreatINg Places program to support the development of Sargent Road Nature Park in Indianapolis. The community stepped up to fund the purchase and permanent protection of the land, but funding for key improvements like parking, trails, and signage remained an uphill challenge. Through the CreatINg Places campaign, community members and supporters came together to fund those additional improvements. In reaching their fundraising goal, MCC unlocked matching funds from IHCDA and moved the project forward.

That campaign did more than raise funds. It built momentum, strengthened community ownership, and helped transform Sargent Road Nature Park into a space that is now open to and enjoyed by the public. Today it stands as a clear example of how community-driven investment, paired with support from IHCDA, can make lasting improvements to public spaces.

The CreatINg Places program aligns closely with the mission of land trusts like MCC. It empowers communities to shape the places they care about while amplifying local investment through IHCDA's matching support. Now, they are excited to bring that same energy and partnership to Blue Heron Nature Preserve in Indianapolis.

Located in the heart of the Mud Creek corridor, this project will protect and restore critical habitat while creating a welcoming, accessible space for the public. Planned improvements include a small parking area, trails, gathering spaces, and educational signage that invites people of all ages to explore and connect with nature. With more than 900 acres of forest in this corridor still at risk of development, projects like Blue Heron Nature Preserve are essential to protecting and connecting the natural landscapes that define the community.

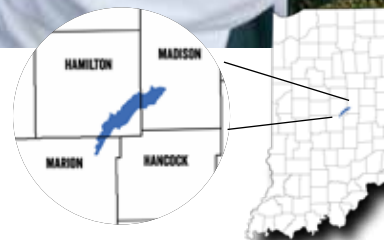
Through this second CreatINg Places campaign, MCC once again has the opportunity to pair grassroots support with IHCDA's investment, turning individual contributions into meaningful, on-the-ground impact.

"We couldn't be more excited to continue growing our incredible network of supporters through this matching grant opportunity from IHCDA," said Ben Miller, Executive Director of MCC. "If our community can rise to this challenge once again, we can take another meaningful step toward connecting Indianapolis area residents with nature while protecting a haven for the remarkable biodiversity of the Mud Creek Valley."

"This project is a great example of how communities can come together to invest in meaningful places," said Bridget Anderson, Indiana Director of Patronicity. "CreatINg Places is designed to connect Hoosiers to their neighborhoods, towns, and natural spaces by inviting public participation. Every contribution helps create a shared asset that will benefit the community for generations."

This partnership between the State of Indiana, through IHCDA, and land trusts like Mud Creek Conservancy represents a powerful model for conservation and community development, ensuring projects are supported by the people they serve.

*Images: Mud Creek flows through Blue Heron Nature Preserve (top); Children explore an illustrated sign at Sargent Road Nature Park (bottom). Photos provided by MCC.*



Mud Creek Conservancy is dedicated to conserving, restoring, and protecting natural areas in the Mud Creek Watershed through land protection initiatives, community outreach and environmental education.

## Supporters and Partners

Our work is made possible thanks to the generosity and commitment of our foundation partners, members, corporate partners, and donors. Thank you for your support of Indiana's conservation community.



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Finger Lakes BMW in honor of Jerry R. Knaus

### Members

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Archaeological Research Institute  
Blue Heron Ministries  
Buffalo Trace Land Trust  
Cardinal Land Conservancy  
Central Indiana Land Trust  
Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy  
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Indiana Land Protection Alliance champions land and water conservation for all of Indiana by uniting, empowering, and elevating Indiana's land conservation community. We believe that Indiana's land trusts and conservation partners are stronger when we work together.

## 2025 Collective Impact

**3,193** *new acres protected*

**11,144** *additional acres of habitat restored*

**38,121** *people engaged through outreach events*

**249** *preserves open to the public*

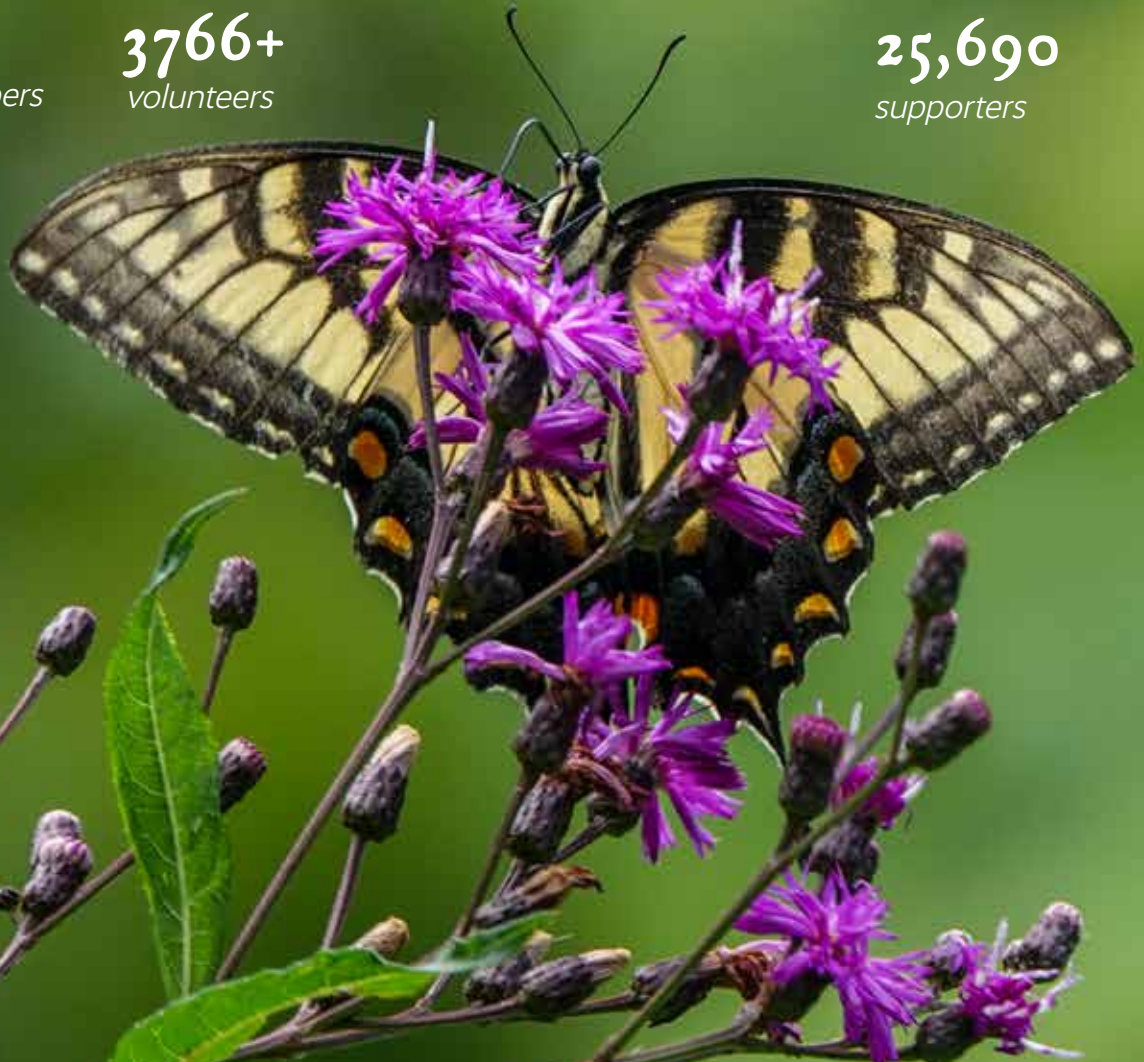
**288** *miles of trail*

**187,000** *total acres protected forever*

**230**  
*staff members*

**3766+**  
*volunteers*

**25,690**  
*supporters*



*Eastern tiger swallowtail on ironweed | Photo by Zachary Cody*