



Landscapes

Close to Apogee

Creating the Portman Nature Preserve

Balmy September breezes seemed to carry the mosquitoes away; nay much to dampen the enthusiasm of a memorable night for the SWMLC faithful who rallied under the festive radiance of globe lights framing the carnival tent. The grand reunion was thoroughly in order; some high-brow chow to celebrate 25 splendid years, and a buoyant proposition for the future to follow.

While I scanned tables of familiar faces, our ambitious project was introduced by its most ardent proponent and SWMLC's longest-tenured staff member, Nate Fuller. My gaze shifted to early founder Bob Pleznac, standing at the rear of the tent. Touching the shoulder of his wife, Pleznac glanced up and directed her attention toward the projected image displaying the words 'Portman Conservation Project'. "This is my dream" he said.

SWMLC officially began laying the groundwork in 2008, with an award to study the flora of the Portman property from the Defenders of Wildlife. "A regional hot-spot of biodiversity" was the confirming verdict. Floristic evaluations of the 188-acre property yielded an unheard of number of plant species: 446, with many rare and declining plant species populating the large, intact, high-quality prairie fen habitats on-site. It is these keystone habitats that harbor the highly vulnerable and rapidly disappearing federally-endangered Mitchell's satyr (see article on page 16) which are in turn supported by an impressive high pressure artesian zone that forms the fen's rich headwater springs. Furthermore, these celebrated springs are a major supplier of clean cold water to the Paw Paw River.

All of this notwithstanding, a place of this size so close to the suburban fringe of nearby Mattawan, fronting all or parts of three inland lakes with oaks and hickories towering above a diverse native ground flora, this alone would more than whet the appetites of the land protection junkies. The investigation, as stated, revealed much more and the enormity of a land protection opportunity began to

take shape and focus. There was the confirmation of the fen's purity, and the oaks and hickories towering above a diverse native ground flora; but perhaps more rousing yet, the botanical clues pointed to important constituents of another rare community: oak savanna. This shook the purists among those working in ecosystem health, as the place revealed an alluring opportunity for landscape-level restoration, integrating two rare and critically vulnerable natural communities while bringing them back to health.

Was the Portman Conservation Project pre-ordained for SWMLC? Probably. And it transcends old and new around the saving of an iconic species, while engaging people in a rare, exceptional natural offering that should not be taken for granted here in southwest Michigan. From a primarily scientific origin, SWMLC was born into the quest of sparing the magnificent survivors in their vulnerable places, meaning we sought to protect rare plant communities and extend a permanent lifeline.

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The Portman Acquisition Project has partnership written all over it, with committed partners at the federal, state, and local levels on the public side in addition to several private foundations.

In all, nearly two million dollars have been raised to date with \$200,000 to go and a matching challenge grant from the Carls Foundation underway for up to \$75,000 in additional funding.

Please consider helping us meet this challenge by making a holiday gift that helps create the Portman Nature Preserve!

For those of you who have helped carry SWMLC forward year after year, this opportunity represents the pinnacle of what we can achieve as your local land conservancy.

The following entities have stepped forward with individual support of over \$100,000 for the Portman Nature Preserve project:

- **The Conservation Fund through Enbridge, Inc.**
- **Julie and Jerry Portman**
- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**
- **U.S. Forest Service**

Generous financial support has additionally been provided by: Audubon Society of Kalamazoo, The Burdick-Thorne Foundation, The Carls Foundation, Environmental Action Fund at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, Fort Wayne Zoo, the H.P. and Genevieve Connable Fund, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Mitchell's Satyr Recovery Team, and the Nancy Malcomson Connable Fund.

Thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to making a landscape level impact through conservation work in Southwest Michigan.

PHOTO CREDITS

LEFT COLUMN

WMU student field trip — Nate Fuller

Immature tamarack cone — Tyler Bassett

Pitcher plants — Ivan LaBianca

Ronda Spink and Ashley Wick of Kalamazoo Nature Center release Mitchell's satyr butterfly larvae that were grown in their captive-rearing program. — Mitch Lettow

RIGHT COLUMN

Michael Anderson, of Kalamazoo Nature Center's captive-rearing program, heading into the fen — Mitch Lettow

Mitchell's satyr butterfly — Nate Fuller

Fritillary butterfly nectaring on swamp milkweed — Nate Fuller

Mud Lake, view from the causeway — Ivan LaBianca





Close to Apogee, *continued from page 1*

From this blueprint, SWMLC slowly ascended to 1,000 and 10,000 foot views where increasing value was placed on the unfragmented landscape and where efficiency, clean water priorities, and resonance with a broader segment of society became guiding precepts. And henceforth we go, seeking to connect people to the land.

Back when they bought the property in the 1980's, owners Jerry and Julie Portman saw enormous potential as a blue-ribbon trout farm. Today, a community of regional stakeholders sees enormous potential in what this project might hold for area educators. "This presents an exciting and wonderful opportunity for authentic learning in a natural setting," retired Mattawan educator Bill McNulty affirms. Western Michigan University classes are already engaged in determining the public use potential, and an open public day and design charrette are soon to come. "The Portman Nature Preserve will be an ideal and unique outdoor learning laboratory for children and adults of all stages and ages," McNulty predicts. "There is so much to be learned from this place on many different levels," adds Fuller. "And a rare opportunity to work in a setting with such great biodiversity."

Fuller easily recalls the day he first met Jerry Portman in 2003. Then, the Portman property was one of 21 remaining viable Mitchell's satyr breeding sites (today there are just 15), and we were given permission by the Portmans to conduct annual monitoring of the species through our work with the satyr recovery team. "Jerry was

very protective of his land and their privacy, but so proud of its wilderness-like beauty. He made it clear we were welcome as long as we respected it likewise." The magnitude of what their property means to the satyr and to so many other species, and our role in helping to manage that, eventually helped us earn the Portmans' trust.

Today, Jerry and Julie are overjoyed by the astonishing public and governmental support for this project. As evidence of their commitment, the Portmans have given SWMLC time and a significant donation of value to facilitate this acquisition. So now we must finish the job.

And in as much as the flapping wings of a smallish, brown butterfly led us to this work, we will not know the depth of impact that saving a place for a butterfly will have until the last dollar is raised and the story is well and told, generations from today. From what science has revealed, this indicator species begs us to learn and understand the repercussions of modern land use on biodiversity, and to get a little sophisticated with our land use controls for nature's sake! With unprecedented public and private support, SWMLC is now staring down a Herculean opportunity to nurture and protect a formidable climate refugia. The acquisition will earn us more responsibility and we hope that elevates the odds of taking this delicate beacon of ecosystem health to apogee; bringing the satyr back from the brink of extinction. All the while, creating a place where organic interactions between people and the nature they hold little dominion over can unfold.

— Geoffrey Cripe

"A Regional Hotspot of Biodiversity"

The Portman property features three lakes, a high-quality prairie fen, remnants of a historical oak savanna, and numerous seeps, springs, and headwater streams that recharge and influence the greater Paw Paw River Watershed. In its current condition, the Portman property helps to ensure clean, abundant water throughout the watershed. In its restored condition, the Portman property will not only have expanded functionality for cleaning water but will contain even healthier versions of the oak-hickory forest, oak savanna, and prairie fen habitats that make it so special.

These habitats are home to 23 state-listed species, in addition to the federally-threatened Eastern massasauga rattlesnake and federally-endangered Mitchell's satyr butterfly. The water quality and wildlife habitat values and their potential enhancement represent objectives of the highest order of priority for SWMLC. A major focus for SWMLC post-acquisition will be to restore damaged areas of the property through activities such as invasive and non-native species eradication, nurturing remnant habitats with supplemental plantings, and restoring some of the altered hydrology on-site.

— Geoffrey Cripe



Photo collage by Nate Fuller

The pattern on each Eastern box turtle's shell is as unique as a fingerprint. SWMLC is building a collection of box turtle "mug shots", recording their location and gender whenever they are found. The photo collage above is a sample of turtles found on the Portman property so far. This information will help create a better understanding of the distribution of these increasingly rare turtles and identify important habitat areas.

— Nate Fuller

Portman Nature Preserve Steering Committee

SWMLC has assembled a steering committee to ensure that public use and stewardship objectives are balanced so that the future Portman Nature Preserve will be a place of incredible value for students and educators. We were fortunate to convene professionals from diverse locations and backgrounds to advise and support us in this unprecedented effort. This committee will represent and help implement a vision for this future nature preserve.

SWMLC Board representative Thom Coder

William Buhl, Dave Lemberg, Bill McNulty, John Paquin, Rich Wyrwa

THE FUTURE

Portman Nature Preserve

Van Buren County, Michigan

