SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN LAND CONSERVANCY

Protecting Nature

improving habitat • ensuring water quality • supporting biodiversity
connecting people and nature • helping families conserve the land they love

The Plotts addition to Emmons Augusta Floodplain Forest
Read the full story on page 4
Photo, Emily Wilke

Spring 2022 – Vol. 31, No. 1

If we, the people of southwest Michigan, don't protect our land and water – *who will?*

The Power of Nature

Peter Ter Louw, President and Executive Director

Bow in the Clouds Preserve, Kalamazoo | Nate Fuller

The world is a heavy place right now, and current events – both domestic and worldwide – sometimes make it hard to reconcile that suffering and beauty can coexist in the same space. Here at SWMLC, our answer is always the power of nature. We encourage you to take time to find peace and respite in nature and visit one of the special places that we're able to share with you.

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With everything that's been going on, the past two years have been among the most tumultuous that SWMLC has ever faced. But, those two years also came with tremendous opportunities to protect and steward more land, and connect with even more people than before. Some of these opportunities required all-consuming fundraising campaigns that stretched the collective energy of SWMLC's staff and Board of Directors, as well as our members' support. But you came through and, together, we've overcome immense challenges and had one of our most productive periods in our thirty-year history. I am extremely pleased with this body of work, and sincerely honored and encouraged by the unwavering support you have shown.

This year, after such a growth spurt and with transitions taking place in our land protection department, we are taking the time to downshift a bit to rebuild our staff capacity, focusing on stewarding the land we've already protected, and developing people- and eco-friendly access so that we can better share all of our public places with you.

At Porter Legacy Dunes, where fragile dune ecology must be balanced with human use, we're working with a diverse group of conservation partners to explore the concept of an interdunal trail system connecting the two-mile region between Van Buren State Park and Pilgrim Haven Natural Area. At the future Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve, we're designing, planning, and developing a trail system and trailhead, signage, parking area, and long-term habitat management plans. In Glenn, at the popular Wau-Ke-Na, W.E. Smith Preserve's North Tract, we will be adding new trails and improving the parking area. And at many of our other public preserves, we're actively restoring habitat by eliminating invasive species, applying prescribed fire, and enhancing wetlands.

These beautiful, healthy, welcoming natural areas are there for you to visit and enjoy nature's healing power. **You made them happen and we are forever grateful for your support.**

Together, We Can Do BIG Things

How can I make a difference?

Sometimes in the face of big challenges, it's hard to imagine the difference that just one person can make. But Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy was started by a handful of local people just like you who saw that nature in our region was disappearing and wanted to do something about it. Now, 30 years later, we have a community of over 1,200 members, donors and volunteers who have conserved over 17,500 acres, and created over 50 nature preserves in southwest Michigan.

If you're not already a member, please consider joining this amazing group of "regular" people who are making an impact by supporting SWMLC's work through membership. There are a lot more forests, marshes, prairies, dunes, fens, and family farms in our region that need to be conserved – and we need your help to do it!

So, the answer to the question, "How can I make a difference?" is "Become a member!" Together, we are powerful! We can do BIG things that make a difference for nature, for wildlife, for people, and for the planet!

www.swmlc.org/membership

Make a difference for nature every month

Set up a sustaining membership that will be automatically billed to your credit card and you will provide SWMLC with a stable source of support. You decide how much you want to contribute and how often: monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. It's easy! Set up your account online when you register for membership.

Join the Blue Green Society

Blue for the abundant waters that surround us here in southwest Michigan, green for the rich and diverse land with which we're blessed. Join the Blue Green Society, an amazing group of supporters who pledge to support SWMLC's mission annually at $1000 or above. You will receive invitations to special, small group field trips – **while knowing that you're support is making a real change.**

Memberships start at just $50 per year (or about 14 cents a day!)

Floodplain Paradise

Photo from nearby Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve
Jesse Lincoln, Michigan Natural Features Inventory

New protected property expands Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve

Some natural areas just don't easily bend to meet most human beings. Their stubborn wetness and mosquito clouds are clear 'keep out' signs and – though we might wonder what mysteries lurk among the ferns and cardinal flowers – we know they really aren't meant for us. It's like that on the recently donated Plotts property near Augusta: 88 acres of forested uplands and floodplain on the Kalamazoo River, located less than a quarter mile north of SWMLC's 292-acre (Robert and Rosalie Emmons) Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve.

This wild landscape is bordered on the west by Highway M-96 and a high-speed Amtrak rail line, and on the east by the 200-foot span of the Kalamazoo River. The Plotts property is divided into two sections that are separated by a skinny strip of land belonging to the Michigan Department of Transportation, where ruins of equipment historically used to pump water to waiting steam locomotives may still be found. It protects a mile of Kalamazoo River frontage directly across from the vast Fort Custer Recreation Area (Michigan Department of Natural Resources) and, when combined with Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve, Fort Custer Training Center (Army National Guard), and Hart's Lake (Calhoun Conservation District), these properties conserve a whopping 10,910 natural acres and nearly 6 miles of river corridor! From dry, sandy oak barrens to wet, mucky floodplain forests, this large-scale conservation goes beyond property lines and instead protects an entire landscape of habitats.

Wayne and Sybil Plotts lived in a house on the highway, just west of the village of Augusta. The backwoods part of their property had been in Sybil's family since the 1940's, and she was known to be its fierce protector. The Plottses planted a small Christmas tree farm on an upland portion of the land and used its wet bottomlands for deer hunting, but mostly, they left the land to nature. Many years ago, Wayne and Sybil received a visit from Bertha Daubendiek, founder of Michigan Nature Association, who noticed some small, unassuming plants with tiny white flowers growing in the floodplain woods. The plants turned out to be the rare goosefoot corn salad *(Valerianella chenopodiifolia),*

Steve Allen, Geum Services

known to grow in only a handful of places in the state. The presence of this little plant with the quirky name may have been what confirmed for the Plottses that their land was truly something worth protecting.

SWMLC first became aware of the Plotts property back in 2014 when Conservation Projects Manager, Emily Wilke, began exploring prospects that could expand the new Kalamazoo River Conservation Plan, developed by a team of public and private partners to protect the best natural areas in the river corridor. Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve was created soon after when the Emmons family generously sold their land to SWMLC at a discounted price (with the added support of federal grant funding secured by Ducks Unlimited) and The Nature Conservancy transferred ownership of an adjacent 68-acre preserve to SWMLC. Emily contacted other landowners in the area and neighbor Wayne Plotts showed interest in protecting his land, too – but not right away. Upon his death in late 2021, Wayne made an enduring gift to conservation and society by leaving the land to SWMLC in his will.

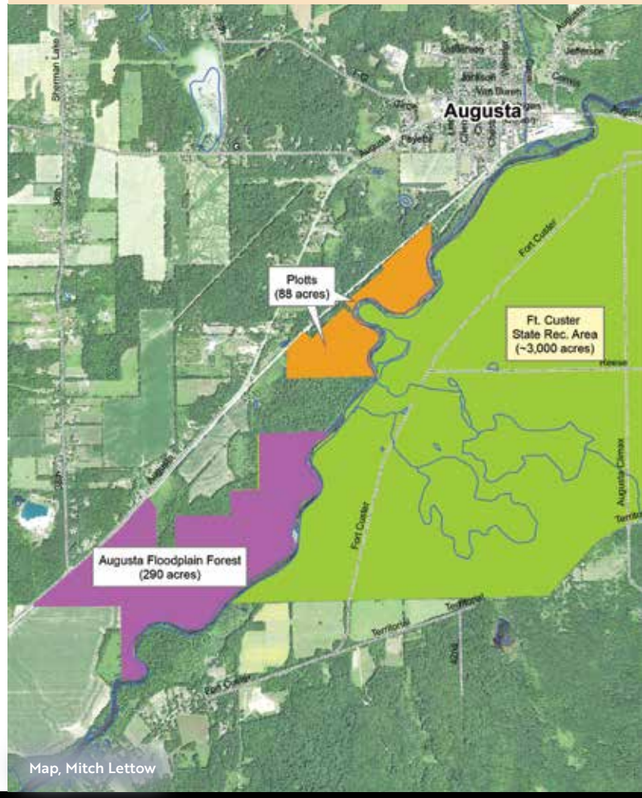
Last summer, Keto Gyekis (member of SWMLC Board of Directors and Wetland Identification Program Coordinator with Michigan EGLE) tromped through the property on an exploratory safari with Emily and SWMLC Stewardship Director Mitch Lettow. They found a botanist's paradise! Dry, sandy uplands – home to the former tree farm – foster young oaks and native prairie plants. Sandy peninsulas extend into the wet forest, their subtle differences in elevation creating a spectrum of micro-habitats, each with its own company of plant species. Beech-maple hummocks stand like small islands above the muck soil. Much of the property steeps within the 'official' 100-year flood zone, perpetually damp and bursting with a remarkable variety of plants and animals.

This intact 'floodplain forest' habitat is considered rare in Michigan and has been rated 'globally vulnerable' by Michigan Natural Features Inventory. Floodplain forests are cool, shady, wet, and very dynamic – which isn't surprising given their close proximity to the massive living organism that is a river. They receive fresh shots of nutrient-rich water whenever river levels rise, making

continued on next page

HUBS & CORRIDORS

"Hubs" and "corridors" are areas of important conservation focus for SWMLC as determined by *Nature's Network,* our Climate Resilience Conservation Plan that was finalized in 2020. Hubs are large areas of protected land that are especially rich in biodiversity. Linking them are corridors, a series of natural connections through which plants and animals can travel to find mates, food, or more favorable conditions. Think of hubs as thriving cities, and corridors as the highways that connect them. The Plotts property and Emmons Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve are located at the north end of the Fort Custer Hub, which is connected by the Augusta Creek Corridor to the 25,000-acre Barry State Game Area Hub (11 miles north).



Map, Mitch Lettow

LIMITED ACCESS

SWMLC plans to add the Plotts property to the nearby Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve, as the two share such similar habitat. **The entire preserve complex will not be open to the public** (except for special field trips) due to the sensitivity of its wet and wild habitats, because it has no road access and may only be reached by crossing a neighbor's land, and because of the dangerous, high-speed railroad line that separates it from the road. Note that Fort Custer Recreation Area just across the river shares similar floodplain habitat and has easy public access for hiking, paddling, and fishing.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT

Read author Tom Springer's first hand account of a field trip to Emmons Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve on our website:

www.swmlc.org/boot-sucking-muck-primal-diversity

Buttonbush is a plant indicator of high-quality habitats.

Photograph from the Plotts property, Emily Wilke

continued from previous page

them especially fertile. In this wild landscape, oxbow ponds reveal the Kalamazoo River's ancient paths. The river's course sculpts the soil over time, leaving behind depressions that sometimes fill with water, where residence is quickly taken up by buttonbush, wood frogs, and a whole cast of water-loving characters. Small pools may result when tall trees are tipped over in storms and their ripped-out roots leave holes in the soil. Evolving situations like these create dynamic combinations of habitat for hundreds of species of plants and animals, as well as reliable travel corridors, bountiful feeding grounds, safe places to breed, and sheltered places to hibernate.

Keto, Emily, and Mitch found lots of cool stuff on their trip to the Plotts property. There were dark forest floors lush with mature skunk cabbages and spicebush. They saw crayfish chimneys and signs of recent beaver work. They noted special plant species, such as American beak grass (listed as 'Threatened' in Michigan), green dragon, American tall bellflower, wood mint, bladdernut, and great water dock, to name a few. They were impressed by the uncommonly big red and silver maples, hickories, and oaks. In his report, Keto wrote that the habitat offers good nesting opportunities for Louisiana water thrushes, and prothonotary and cerulean warblers – songbirds that are listed as species of 'Special Concern' in Michigan. He thought it likely that 'State Threatened' red-shouldered hawks and yellow-throated warblers would nest in the large sycamores, and observed perfect Blanding's turtle habitat (another Special Concern species). And, he noted that Indiana bats, animals that are considered endangered both in Michigan and the United States, "likely utilize the various open-canopy areas . . . where ash trees have died for summer maternity roosts and foraging areas." There were also surprisingly few undesirable, introduced species of plants.

Photo from nearby Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve
Jesse Lincoln, Michigan Natural Features Inventory

These wet habitats are beneficial to people, too, even if we never venture foot into them. They have evolved to hold water – the acres of mature trees and the complex of roots and organic matter that fill the spongy soil all work together to hold the river's spillover. By absorbing and storing these massive quantities of water, floodplain forests soften the impacts to downstream communities like Comstock and Kalamazoo during high water events; even though most people never realize it.

The terrible abuse that the Kalamazoo River has suffered in the last two centuries has spoiled its good health, but it still provides vital refuge for animals and plants. For a while, some people turned against the river itself, blaming the victim for carrying raw sewage, industrial chemical waste, spilled oil, and silt. Luckily, those views are changing, the water is getting cleaner, and the Kalamazoo River now has many champions. SWMLC is pleased to be among them, along with Wayne, Sybil, and their family, to whom we are forever grateful for providing us with this opportunity to protect even more of the river's wild sanctuaries.

— Amelia Hansen, SWMLC Communications Specialist
and Mitch Lettow, SWMLC Stewardship Director

Polyphemus moth, photographed at nearby Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve by Mitch Lettow

"I've worked for many years to improve habitat along the Kalamazoo River by protecting the land around it, both with the Four Townships Water Resources Council and with the Kalamazoo River Watershed Council. I don't believe there will ever be an endpoint to this work, but there's been great progress, and we've begun to see the beneficial impacts of our work. It is necessary for citizen groups to have good partners to be effective and SWMLC has been one of the most valuable."

— Kenneth Kornheiser
Board member and Past President of Kalamazoo River Watershed Council and founding member of the Four Townships Water Resource Council

HISTORY OF AUGUSTA FLOODPLAIN FOREST PRESERVE

Learn more about the history of Emmons Augusta Floodplain Forest Preserve in the Spring 2016 issue of *Landscapes* (the former name of SWMLC's newsletter), Vol. 25, No. 1, page 1. It's been archived on our website :

www.swmlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/LND-Spring-2016.pdf

Life Cycles

Amelia Hansen

Emily Wilke and I shared an office at SWMLC. We made it homey by filling its sunny windows with plants and putting pictures of nature and loved ones on the walls. One wall was dominated by an enormous map, studded with colorful push pins representing protected properties in SWMLC's 9-county service area. There were parts of Barry County that were so densely marked that not another pin could be crammed into the space! These were Emily's areas of focus, and each of those pins represented the skill and passion that she brought to land protection.

I'm speaking in the past tense because, after 15 years of protecting habitat and helping families conserve the land they love, Emily is leaving SWMLC. Hired fresh out of graduate school in 2007, she has been with the organization for most of her adult life – and half of SWMLC's existence. She is the main person that many people associate with SWMLC. Her patience, intelligence, and ability to talk with nearly anyone has earned well-deserved respect for her and for the organization. And she has accomplished a lot.

In the 15 years that Emily has been with SWMLC, **she has conserved more than 7,000 acres (nearly 5,294 football fields!)** of pristine headwaters, prime wildlife habitat, and beloved family legacies – which includes helping other organizations to conserve land, a testament to her commitment to nature above glory. She has also helped to bring over $6 million in grant funding to SWMLC!

And, she's been a magnet for bringing conservation partners – government bodies, private organizations, landowners, and volunteer groups – together on projects. Emily has led collaborative conservation planning efforts for the Prairieville Creek at the north end of Gull Lake, and brought together University of Michigan graduate students and over 40 conservation partners on the Kalamazoo River Watershed Council. One of the most notable projects is the Barry State Game Area Conservation Plan, which, back in 2009, set the ambitious goal to protect 2,000 acres in and around the game area. Through Emily's hard work and perseverance (and of course, our partners' efforts, too), that goal is now within sight.

It's an incredible body of work.

Though her passion for conservation remains strong, she also wants to spend more time with her family while her kids are still young, and pursue other interests that she just hasn't had time to explore. We're really going to miss Emily's expertise and experience – and her calm presence and hearty laugh. But we understand: just like one of those plants in our shared office, Emily has deepened her roots and grown new branches.

All the best to you, Emily!

— Amelia Hansen, Communications Specialist

Glass Creek on the 355-acre Schoneboom property, part of the Barry State Game Area Conservation Plan that Emily worked to create and implement. | Peter Ter Louw

"There are two kinds of people in this world - those who love Emily Wilke and those who have yet to meet her. For more than a decade it's been my privilege and pleasure to work with her and observe firsthand her knowledge and skill. She's honest, straightforward, intelligent, courteous, practical, unflappable, always exercising common sense and good judgment in handling and solving the many complicated problems that appear whenever you deal in the real world of land preservation. In the process she's earned the respect of lay persons and professionals alike. She's demonstrated time and again her gift for dealing with difficult people and difficult situations and the ability for leaving behind a trail of goodwill and even friendship. Perhaps she's too modest to acknowledge her contributions during her tenure with SWMLC, but if the truth be known, she's been a key player in the Conservancy's preservation of thousands of acres. Some of her projects have taken years to come to fruition. Because of the seeds she's planted, her labors will continue to provide a future harvest, so only in years to come will her true legacy be known. We are in her debt. She leaves with sincere appreciation for her past service and also will carry with her our good wishes for her future endeavors."

— Alfred J. Gemrich, Attorney
Conservation Easement Owner, Former SWMLC Board Member, Blue Green Society Member

Strouse Property - Carter Lake Preserve Addition

SWMLC is excited to announce that 11 acres of prairie fen, tamarack swamp, and oak-hickory woodland will be added to our Carter Lake Preserve, located just north of Hastings. We had been in contact with Jeremy and Pamela Strouse for about four years after they responded to a mailing that Emily Wilke, SWMLC Conservation Projects Manager, sent to Carter Lake Preserve neighbors. The Strouses kindly offered a discount from the appraised value of the property, enabling us to buy it with funds from a $50,000 US Fish & Wildlife Service North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant that was coordinated by Ducks Unlimited specifically for mallard duck conservation, plus an additional $5,000 gift from Tyden Ventures. With over 300 feet of frontage on Carter Lake, the new addition runs along the entire western edge of the existing preserve and is connected by a creek and associated prairie fen wetlands. The addition of the Strouse property to Carter Lake Preserve increases the resiliency of the habitat by providing a safe travel corridor for wildlife and plants, which increases the diversity and unique qualities of the natural communities.

Many thanks to Jeremy and Pamela Strouse and Tyden Ventures for their generous conservation spirits!
Emily Wilke

Birds Gotta Fly

Kalamazoo River backwaters at the future Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve | Hilary Hunt

The little bird gathers itself and then, in slow motion, springs from the palm. It blurs toward the camera, then past it, leaving behind a person with an outstretched arm. Like those bittersweet 'bird release' videos, SWMLC's staff has watched with mixed emotions as our friend and colleague, Hilary Hunt, flies away.

Hilary was hired in November 2018 as a Land Protection Specialist and later became director of the Land Protection Department. Soon after being hired, she jumped into organizing a series of outreach events focused on promoting land protection in the Gull Lake Watershed with an enthusiasm that we later grew to know well. In her short time at SWMLC, she worked on over a dozen conservation easements, developed an EGLE-funded project to protect multiple properties in the Paw Paw River Headwaters, and played an essential role in developing *Nature's Network,* SWMLC's Climate Resiliency Plan. And she successfully led two of SWMLC's largest and most complex recent land protection projects: creating the conservation easement that will protect the future Kalamazoo County Park called the Arthur E. and Mildred H. Woollam Nature Preserve (formerly known as Camp Rota-Kiwan), and the future Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve in Allegan. We're going to miss her valuable mix of talents and assets.

Amelia Hansen

But we're also going to miss her very goofy sense of humor and uncanny ability to attract wildlife (from snakes to mink) into her personal space, a talent that earned her the staff nickname 'Snow White'. (Remember how the animals gathered around Snow White in the animated Disney movie?)

Hilary is now a doctoral student studying Environment and Resources at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where we know her passion for the environment will be put to good use.

Those 'bird release' videos all share one other thing: the cheers of encouragement from the people left behind.

Go, Hilary!

— Amelia Hansen, Communications Specialist

A Magical Place

A new conservation easement protects Paw Paw River Headwaters

Sometimes, 'professional' language just doesn't cut it. "The first time I saw it, I knew it was a magical place. The sun was filtering all golden through the leaves and the forest floor was green with moss and ferns . . . it was like a fairy kingdom!" Even though Hilary Hunt, SWMLC's Director of Land Protection, knew the correct scientific terms with which to describe a piece of land, these glowing words describe her first impression of a new private conservation easement that protects land and water in the Paw Paw River Headwaters area.

The 79-acre property contains a healthy and diverse 40-acre woodland, 33 acres of floodplain forest, and a full mile of headwaters frontage. Unspoiled by development or pollution, the darkly beautiful headwaters that are protected by this private conservation easement are filtered, cleansed, and fortified by its wet habitats, providing a nourishing start to one of the largest watersheds in southwest Michigan.

The property teems with life. Large trees offer nesting sites for a wide variety of birds – from scarlet tanagers to thrushes to pileated woodpeckers – and the wild floodplain forest produces ample songbird food in the form of mosquitoes and other insects. The moist conditions are an amphibian's paradise and provide refuge for shy creatures such as snakes and mink. Trees that like wet feet dominate the floodplain forest, including silver maples, swamp white oaks, and tulip poplars. Understory trees such as musclewood, pawpaw, and witch hazel enjoy the dense shade – and unusual plants like lizard's tail, cardinal flower, and ferns galore form strange gardens in the moss and mud.

Earlier this year, SWMLC was generously awarded grant funding by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy that allows us to purchase conservation easements like this one in the Paw Paw River Headwaters. Five proposed projects could collectively protect this part of eastern Van Buren County that has been recognized as a 'hub' (a large, biodiverse reservoir of natural land where focused conservation efforts will make the biggest impact) in SWMLC's recently completed *Nature's Network,* Climate Resilience Strategic Conservation Plan – and part of our long-term work within this important watershed.

To date, SWMLC has protected over 3 ½ square miles of land along the Paw Paw River through 18 conservation easements and preserves. In fact, this property is so strategically located that it lies within a five-mile radius of more than 1,196 acres of already-protected land, including: Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery, Almena Township Forest and Hunting Land, the Kal-Haven Trail Sesquicentennial State Park, Michigan Audubon's Martha Mott Preserve, SWMLC's Portman Nature Preserve, Wolf Tree Nature Trails, Sand Creek Preserve, and Paw Paw River Preserve (the latter two are limited access). Though the borders of all these protected properties don't touch, they collectively provide a body of safe havens for plants and wildlife, and help protect drinking water quality for everyone in the region.

Here at SWMLC, we are humbled when we consider the positive impact that protected land like this makes for future generations of people and wildlife.

It's even better when it also resembles a fairy kingdom!

— Amelia Hansen, Communications Specialist

PLEASE NOTE

This private conservation easement is not open to the public. We have deliberately not disclosed the name or location of this new conservation easement to protect the landowner's privacy.

Hilary Hunt

There are Already Frogs!

Hydrology Restoration at Heath Road Preserve

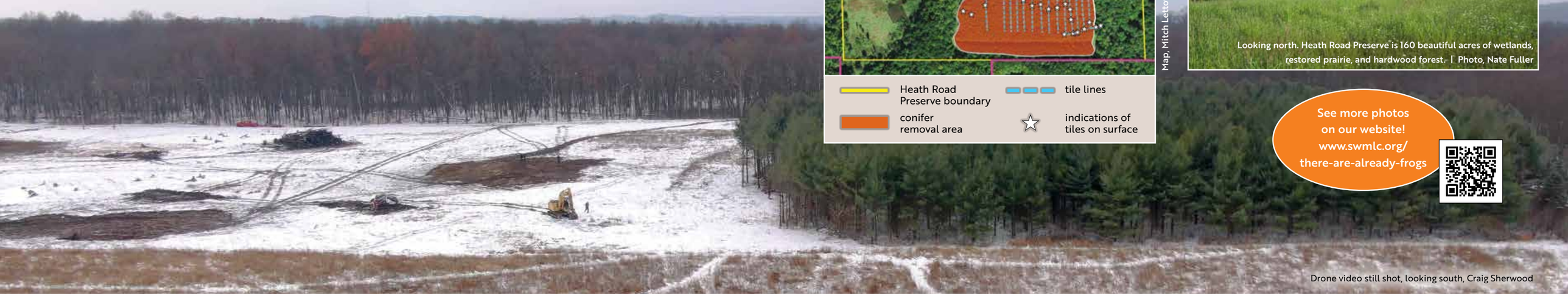
Map, Mitch Lettow

Watch the video *The Day They Broke the Tiles* featuring incredible drone footage of Generation III Excavation at work by Craig Sherwood, Mitten Environmental LLC of Kalamazoo!

Find it on SWMLC's YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/8HbGA9nmSX8

Looking north. Heath Road Preserve is 160 beautiful acres of wetlands, restored prairie, and hardwood forest. | Photo, Nate Fuller

See more photos on our website! www.swmlc.org/there-are-already-frogs



Drone video still shot, looking south, Craig Sherwood

We knew something funny was going on at Heath Road Preserve. Upland areas were strangely wet and low spots were dry. There were mushy patches and weird sinkholes filled with rushing water, and trucks kept getting stuck in the upland mud. This place turned typical hydrology on its head!

Habitat work at the preserve (located next to the Barry State Game Area) began even before Tyden Ventures generously donated it to SWMLC in 2014, when the health of an existing pond was improved by removing fill dirt and releasing a diverted spring. Even then, former Conservation and Stewardship Director Nate Fuller noticed the site's quirky hydrology and suspected we might have another Hidden Pond Preserve on our hands . . .

At Hidden Pond, past farmers had buried clay pipes (called 'tiles') in the soil to drain water away from a low spot in a hilltop field where it collected and ruined crops. Wanting to restore more natural drainage, SWMLC worked with the former landowner to break up the tiles – with dramatic results!

The hollow filled with water within a week, creating the preserve's namesake pond. Soon after, frogs and aquatic plants mysteriously arrived. We wondered, where did they come from?

Back at Heath Road Preserve, Nate and then-Stewardship Specialist (now Stewardship Director) Mitch Lettow began searching for buried tiles and mapped the locations of any they found. They concluded that dozens of parallel lines of tile extended from the restored grassland into a conifer plantation. (See map on opposite page.) Aerial photos from the 1930's show open farmland in that area but, sometime in the 1990's, 15 acres of white pine and Norway spruce had been planted right on top of the tiles. Over time, tree roots and old age cracked the tiles, so that gushing water scoured away the soil whenever it rained hard, causing cave-ins and sinkholes.

The 15-acre conifer plantation wasn't high quality habitat. The artificial woodland's dense canopy of needles made it too dark for most understory plants to sprout – except in openings created by drowned trees, which had filled with pesky autumn olive bushes. But the promising presence of a few native sedges and asters encouraged SWMLC staff that it was worth trying to bring more natural drainage back to the land.

The first step in doing that was to remove most of theintroduced conifers in an ecologically-sound, cost-effective way. The trees were too skinny to sell for timber and poor candidates for bio-char (a soil-amendment product). Chipping was considered – but no one wanted the chips – and leaving a thick layer behind would smother the very habitat we wanted to restore. And there was serious concern that, left in piles, hot composting chips could spontaneous combust! After years of exploring our options, we finally decided to knock the trees down, burn them, and scatter the charred pieces to create habitat.

Our partners at Generation III Excavating began the monumental task of tree-toppling in Spring 2021, then continued the work in August. When they returned in December, it took just one day to dig up the tiles that were buried eight feet underground, break and rebury them, build a berm to direct water away from a road, and install an "agri-drain" for overflow. They also dug several shallow ponds . . . and we waited to see what would happen. Within 24 hours, the ponds had filled with thousands of gallons of water! And four days later, frogs were seen swimming in the new ponds – in December! Just like with Hidden Pond Preserve, we wonder where they came from and how they got the memo so quickly.

It's always hard to see living trees destroyed – even artificial forests planted by people – but we hold onto that vision of a future, healthy habitat. "Humans changed the landscape for their own purpose – then abandoned that purpose," reflected Mitch. "We hope to show that people can also change things for the better, to benefit species besides our own." The frogs didn't bother with any such philosophizing and just decided to jump on it.

— Amelia Hansen, SWMLC Communications Specialist
and Mitch Lettow, SWMLC Stewardship Director

You 're making a difference in southwest Michigan!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR AMAZING SUPPORT!

A HUGE THANK YOU

to everyone who donated in support of the future Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve!

We received a record number of donations for our year-end appeal (more than in any other year), with over 200 people donating over $110,000 – more than matching the $50,000 challenge grant offered by the Carls Foundation.

We're blown away by your generous response.

When combined with the $100,000 grant from the Consumers Energy Foundation Planet Awards, we now have $260,000 with which to build a parking lot and trailhead, create a sustainable trail system, install wayfinding and interpretive signage, complete management plans, begin habitat restoration, and create a long-term management fund to ensure that this special property will be cared for and protected forever.

For now, the preserve remains closed to the public. We ask that people please be patient while we create safe and responsible public access that not only protects visitors, but plants and wildlife as well.

We hope to open the Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve to the public in Fall 2022 . . . and we can't wait to share it with you!

FUTURE ARMINTROUT-MILBOCKER NATURE PRESERVE 2021 YEAR END APPEAL DONORS

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The Esther and George Jaruga Charitable Foundation
The Lawrence and Sylvia Wong Foundation
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US Fish & Wildlife Service North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Southeastern Lake Michigan Coastal Habitat Initiative III

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John and Shannon Floyd
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David Jackson and Margaret McAllistar
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William and Kathleen Main
Jeffrey Mohney, in memory of Justin and Russell Mohney
Tom and Linda Powell
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Richard and Julie Wyrwa

THESE GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS DONATED UP TO $1,000

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Kathryn Almy and Robert Kakuk
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THANK YOU!

We hope to open the Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve to the public in Fall 2022 . . . and we can't wait to share it with you!

In memory of
Frank Ballo

It is with great sadness that we share the news about the recent passing of our friend, Frank Ballo. Frank was an ardent environmentalist and, in addition to his long career with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), he was deeply involved with Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. A member since our founding days, he served as the President of the Board of Directors for several years and stepped in as Interim Director for more than 12 months in 2001 – even though he already had a fulltime job. More recently, Frank was an active member of the SWMLC Land Protection Team, drawing from his experience with the MDEQ to help guide us with land and easement acquisitions. He was a huge help in the annual monitoring of conservation easements and greatly enjoyed interacting with our landowners. Frank loved traveling, birding, fly-fishing, and backpacking.

One SWMLC staff member recalls a backpack trip to the Smokies in the 1970's when Frank was sent running barefoot through the woods by a bear that had ransacked his campsite during the night, stealing all his food except peppermints and dried prunes! Food rations were shared, and the trip continued. Frank thoroughly enjoyed life, and was always willing to sit, talk with friends and colleagues, and listen to the stories we had to share. He was relentlessly cheerful and kind, and he cared deeply about people. Words don't do justice to how much he will be missed.

As a testament to his sincere devotion to the environment and desire to support our conservation work into the future, Frank generously bequeathed his beloved home and property to SWMLC, and included the Sustain SWMLC Endowment Fund in his final directive. We are profoundly grateful to Frank for his compassion, forethought, steadfast support, and friendship over the years.

SWMLC Endowment Funds

Together, we are preserving wild and scenic places for today . . . and keeping them healthy for tomorrow.

Forever is an eternity. Long after all of us have passed on, the land we've conserved together will still be here: natural, wild, protected.

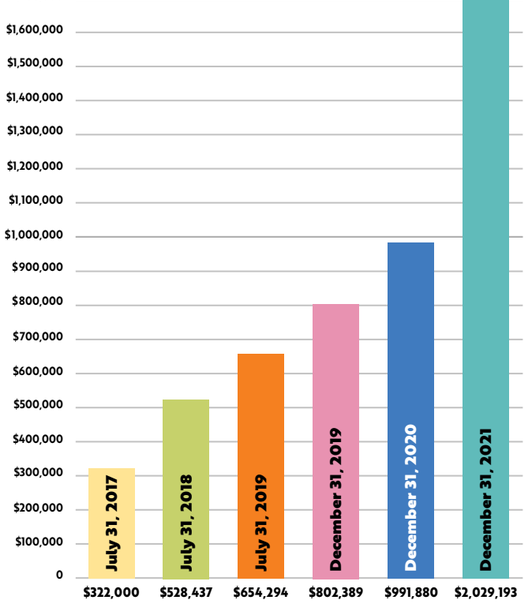
In order to keep our promise of forever, SWMLC must grow an endowment fund that will provide for us in perpetuity. Whether it's taking care of the land we own or annual monitoring of conservation easements and preserves, we need to be able to pay for our legal conservation obligations **forever.**

We are on our way to developing an endowment capable of supporting operations long term – but there's still quite a ways to go. Our hope is that over the next 10 years, our endowment funds will have grown to a level where they produce the necessary funding that ensures the land we protect today will remain protected tomorrow.

You can help by making a contribution to the Sustain SWMLC Endowment Fund or the George Lauff Land & Stewardship Endowment Fund. Either way, your support is a gift that you are leaving for endless future generations.

Whatever the gift, we are immensely grateful for the foresight and commitment of those who give to further the cause of conservation even beyond their lifetimes.

Thank you.



To learn more about giving to SWMLC's endowment, please visit our website (www.swmlc.org/sustain-swmlc-fund/) or contact President and Executive Director Peter Ter Louw at terlouw@swmlc.org.

Donations • October 16, 2021 – January 31, 2022

You make our work possible. Thank you!

The following contributions were made by people who love the forests, fields, lakes, marshes, prairies, rivers, streams, swamps, and woods of Southwest Michigan.

Honor Gifts

Bud and Judi Baldwin
In honor of Woody Boudeman at Christmas

Emmelynn Balsis
In honor of my daughter Margie's birthday.

Sherwood and Kathryn Boudeman
In honor of Sherwood M. Boudeman

Joan Brigham
In honor of Dave and Jan Brigham

Sharon Carlson and Thomas Dietz
In honor of Tom Seiler
In honor of Maryellen Haines

Pam Dalitz
In thanks to Amelia and Miko and all of the hard work they do to make this an amazing organization.

Sharon Doolittle, DVM
In honor of Marilyn Doolittle

MaryEllen Hains
In honor of Tom and Ruth Small
In honor of Tom Dietz and Sharon Carlson
In honor of Thomas Seiler

Tobi Hanna-Davies
In honor of Joel Lane and Angela Gusse

Pam Hjelmquist
In honor of Kenneth Kirton for Christmas

Katya Hokanson
In honor of my aunt, Charlotte Mittler, a strong supporter of SWMLC

Patrick Hudson and Gina Frasson-Hudson
In honor of Dean and Jane Knuth

Laura Huth-Rhoades and Tom Rhoades
In honor of my parents, Mike and Pat Huth

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In loving memory of Zoe, best friend and loving companion

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In memory of Carole Birch
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Jack and Nanette Keiser
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And **THANK YOU** *to our "snow angels," those generous preserve stewards who have been plowing snow in our preserve parking lots.*

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Welcome to New Members!

Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly ($1000+)
James Chinworth
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Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake ($500+)
Clyde and Nancy Rode

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Spotted Turtle ($100+)
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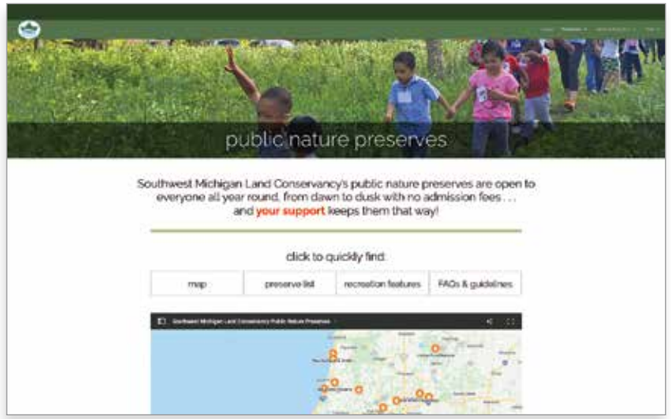
If we have accidentally omitted your name, or you find an error, we apologize. Please call Nicole at 269-324-1600 x307 so we can correct the mistake. Thank you.



Website Update!

We're excited to unveil our fresh, new Public Nature Preserve pages, with an updated look, streamlined navigation, improved load time, and simplified landing page. Check 'em out and choose your next hiking destination!

www.swmlc.org/public-nature-preserves

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Double Your Impact! Many corporations match contributions made to Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy.

Are you an employee of – or retired from – a company with a matching gift program? Send your company form along with your gift and we'll be happy to follow-up! Call Nicole at 269-324-1600 x307 or email her at nmspeedy@swmlc.org.

Your online shopping dollars can still help nature locally when you use Amazon Smile

SWMLC advocates local shopping whenever possible, but sometimes that hard-to-find item is only available online. When that happens, AmazonSmile has nearly all the same stuff as regular Amazon, but automatically donates 0.5% of the purchase price to your chosen charity.

It's easy to sign up: just go to smile.amazon.com, sign into your regular account (or open one), choose a charity *(pick us!)*, then continue shopping - it even works with Prime and with your Amazon mobile app.

It really adds up!

Between January 1 and June 30, 2021, supporters who named SWMLC to be their designated charity generated a $238.49 donation – simply by shopping AmazonSmile!

Thank you!

What's with all the QR codes? We can fit so much more on our website than we can between the covers of the newsletter! Photos, videos, extra stories, side-remarks, links to related articles . . . you can find this extra content quickly by simply pointing the camera of your smartphone at the QR codes (those boxes with the patterns inside). Your phone will automatically offer to open the page for you without you having to type in those long, sometimes confusing web links. Give it a try!

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Spring is here!

Birds, flowers, and . . . *fire?*

SWMLC regularly conducts prescribed fires as a habitat management tool at some of our preserves.

This spring, we're planning 6 burns in 4 counties:

- Future Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve
- Chipman Preserve
- Hidden Pond Preserve
- Portman Nature Preserve
- Wolf Tree Nature Trails

These public preserves will be closed when burns are taking place as a safety precaution. Because safe and successful burns are completely reliant on weather, we can't offer a schedule ahead of time, but will try to post closure notices on our website and social media as soon as possible. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience this may cause.

Learn more about the how's and why's of prescribed fire on our website: www.swmlc.org/what-happened

Stewardship Specialist Dave Brown lighting a prescribed fire at Portman Nature Preserve

Amelia Hansen

Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation. Our mission is to conserve ecologically important and scenic landscapes that give our region its natural character — now and for generations to come.

All programs and services are provided on a nondiscriminatory basis. Federal EIN 38-3038708