Landscapes

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The Un-developers: Groos Family Vision Turns Tired Farm Into a Preserve

Even from the seat of his bicycle, Tom Groos knew this was a deal he couldn't pass by.

There it lay, overgrown with dusty weeds along a dirt road deep in the Barry State Game Area. It was a 65-acre small farm, complete with a meager, abandoned house and an ancient log cabin that tilted toward ruin. Then there was the land itself — rocky, tired out, gully prone and unprofitable for row crops. And the creek that ran through it? Warm, muddy, clogged with silt and generally a toxic menace to the trout stream into which it emptied.

In short, it was exactly what Groos had been looking for.

"All I could think was, 'Gee wouldn't it be great if we could purchase this?'" said Groos, an avid biker with a vacation home on nearby Gun Lake.

Hidden Pond Preserve in its fourth year of restoration. Photo by Nate Fuller.

Despite the property's flaws, Groos saw a spark of potential that no conventional farmer, realtor or banker ever would. And he could see it because he and his family aren't conventional developers. They're actually un-developers.

They've bought and restored native habitat on several parcels of land within the Barry State Game Area. It's part of their charitable commitment to a place the Groos family has long called home.

Yet the vacant farm on Otis Lake Road that caught Groos' eye called for quick action.

"When I called the owner, I learned there were plans to build up to 10 houses there," he said. "This was 2005, during the free and easy mortgage boom. They were building everywhere in the woods of Barry County."

Groos intervened with an offer that saved the farm from an onslaught of survey stakes and earth movers. But for the next phase he needed to undo 140 years or so of heavy-handed human history.

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For that, Groos turned to the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC) and Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). Together, they developed a multi-year restoration plan that's already taken firm root. In December 2010, as they've done with other "un-development" projects, the Groos family donated the land to SWMLC as a public preserve.

"It's a 67-acre parcel, but because it's surrounded by state land, its ecological footprint is much larger than that," said Nate Fuller, SWMLC's conservation and stewardship director.

"If this was developed, they'd have to carve out a buffer zone to restrict firearm use near the houses. That's why we're eager to purchase private inholdings like this one. If all these were built out, they'd reduce the huntable land in the Barry State Game Area by up to 30 percent."

And as Fuller explained, the impact of residential housing does more than limit firearm use. The increased traffic, yard lights, lawn chemicals, cats, dogs and other trappings of modern life all take a disproportionate toll on the natural landscape.

But at the new Hidden Pond Preserve, the real story isn't about what could've been. It's about how quickly nature can rebound given the right care and stewardship.

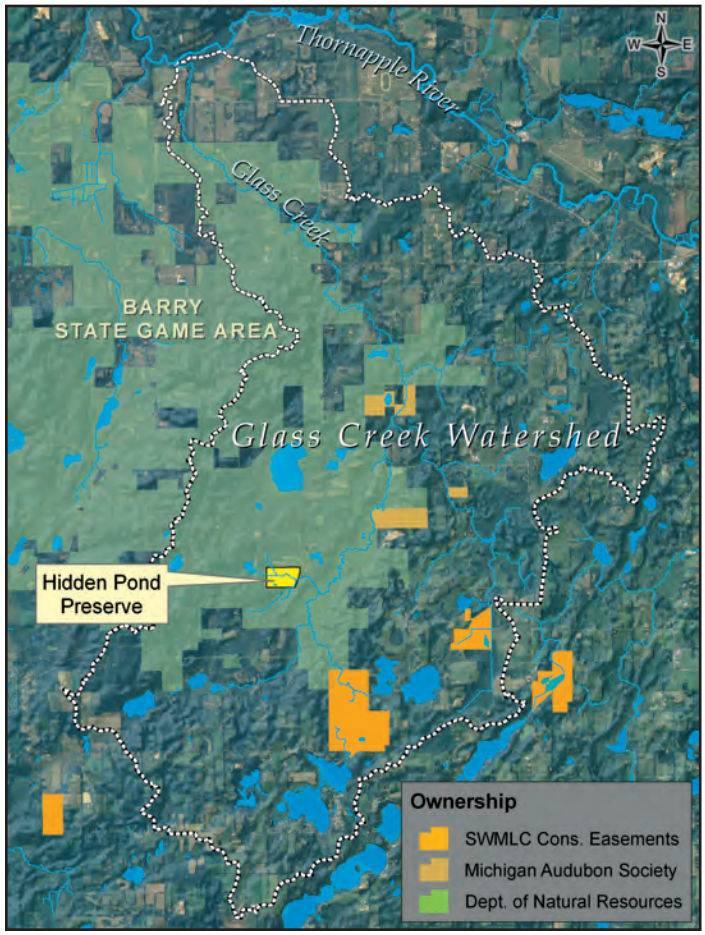
To see it firsthand, I toured the property with Dave Coleman, Tom Groos' brother-in-law. Since Groos lives in Connecticut, Coleman manages much of the family's conservation work.

"Right over there," he said, pointing to a patch of freshly sprouted grass, "is where the old farmhouse stood." The only reminders were a remnant lilac bush and a Japanese maple.

Also relocated from the property was a 20,000 square-foot pole barn. It was still functional, but on a remote nature preserve, a big empty structure can be a magnet for mischief and wind damage.

With the buildings gone, restoration efforts have focused on the stream corridor, the hilly uplands, and oak savanna.

The stream itself had suffered dearly during its years of service to the farm. At its upper end, a man-made berm had cut off the influx of spring-fed water from a wetland. Along its lower course, the stream's curves had been dredged out to straighten its flow. By the farmhouse, the stream was dammed to form a shallow pond that watered ducks and livestock.



The Barry SGA Conservation Plan identified Glass Creek as one of the most important conservation targets in the region. Hidden Pond Preserve protects one of the few private inholdings within the SGA as well as an important tributary to Glass Creek. Map by Nate Fuller.

At times, the stream was even harnessed for a task that could've come straight from the annals of Greek mythology — a la Hercules' clean-up of the Augean stables.

"I'm not sure how," Coleman said, "but they'd reroute the creek through the barn to flush all the manure downstream."

A Conservation Vision for the State Game Area

Hidden Pond Preserve exists within one of the five priority conservation areas identified in the Barry State Game Area (SGA) *Conservation Plan* — the Barry SGA inholdings. Development pressure is high within and along the edges of the Barry SGA, threatened by residential and commercial growth that can severely impact the capacity of the Barry SGA to support recreation and wildlife.

SWMLC partnered with federal, state, and local agencies and nonprofit organizations to create the *Conservation Plan* in 2009. The goal of the plan is to increase protected land that has the greatest benefit for the Barry SGA. Protecting Hidden Pond Preserve helps us to accomplish that goal.

Already, much of this damage has been undone. Last summer a DNR bulldozer tore out the berm to help raise the stream's water level. The banks will be re-sloped to form a gentle floodplain that will deter soil erosion from the high ground.

Near the former home site, a load of fieldstone has stabilized the shoreline. And where the stream passes under Otis Lake Road, a new, egg-shaped culvert allows for a more natural current flow. The old round culvert — much like a giant spigot — dropped water from a height of three feet and made upstream fish migration impossible.

So could the now cooler, deeper, cleaner stream someday harbor a trout population? That's possible, say DNR biologists, since it empties into Glass Creek, a certified trout stream.

Meanwhile, the upland acreage has been reseeded with prairie plants and grasses. Dense stands of big bluestem and little bluestem, sprinkled with splashes of purple coneflower and black-eyed Susan, now thrive amid the decayed corn and soybean stubble.

The biggest surprise of all, however, has been the near-miraculous appearance of a one-acre pond. It occupies a saddle between two hills, about 50 yards uphill from the stream.

In the early 1900s, farmers had hand-dug trenches here for drain tiles (a real-life Herculean labor) that were up to 10 feet deep. The tiles siphoned off enough water to make the land tillable, yet a stubborn damp patch remained. And there in the miry clay, a bounty of native seeds lay patiently dormant, like a time capsule from the long-ago wetland.

"I've had friends who pulled drain tiles from old fields and had wetlands pop up," Fuller said. "But I had no idea it would turn into this.

"Within two months, we had enough water for frogs. By spring the pond was black with clouds of tadpoles. We didn't plant anything but now there's three species of lily pads, a dozen sedges, rushes and pond weeds. You see herons, turtles and dragonflies."

As for the pond's depth, Fuller knows it's at least arm-pit deep. That's how far he waded in before a resident snapping turtle made him beat a hasty retreat.

All of which couldn't make Tom Groos happier that he climbed off his bicycle on that summer day in 2005.

"To see this land come back within five years, it's like playing God in slow motion," he said, from his office in New York City. "More than anything, it's that sense of rejuvenation that I love about this work. If we just give nature a chance, this proves that it can come back from all the bad stuff that man does to it."

— Tom Springer

Tom Springer is a former board member. He is the author of *Looking for Hickories*, a collection of essays about the people and wild landscapes of southwest Michigan. Tom resides in Three Rivers with his wife and two daughters.

2006: Prescribed burn in remnant savanna. Cut invasive shrubs. 15 acres sown into prairie/ savanna native plant mix.

2007: Continued removal of invasive shrubs. Thinned tree lines. Removed drain tiles from wet spot on hill top. Sowed an additional 15 acres into native plants.

2008: Sowed the remaining field into native prairie mix after pulling drain tiles. Cleared tree line separating planting from adjacent DNR fields. Continued invasive shrub removal.

2009: Barns, house, and other structures removed. Small dams removed from stream. Culvert replaced under road to improve stream flow.

2010: DNR removed earthen berm/dam to restore natural flow from headwater springs to stream. Prescribed burn on entire property. Adjacent DNR fields sown into complimentary prairie mixture.

2011: Prescribed burning to continue. Stream restoration to continue — to "un-ditch" portions of the stream to create more natural flows.