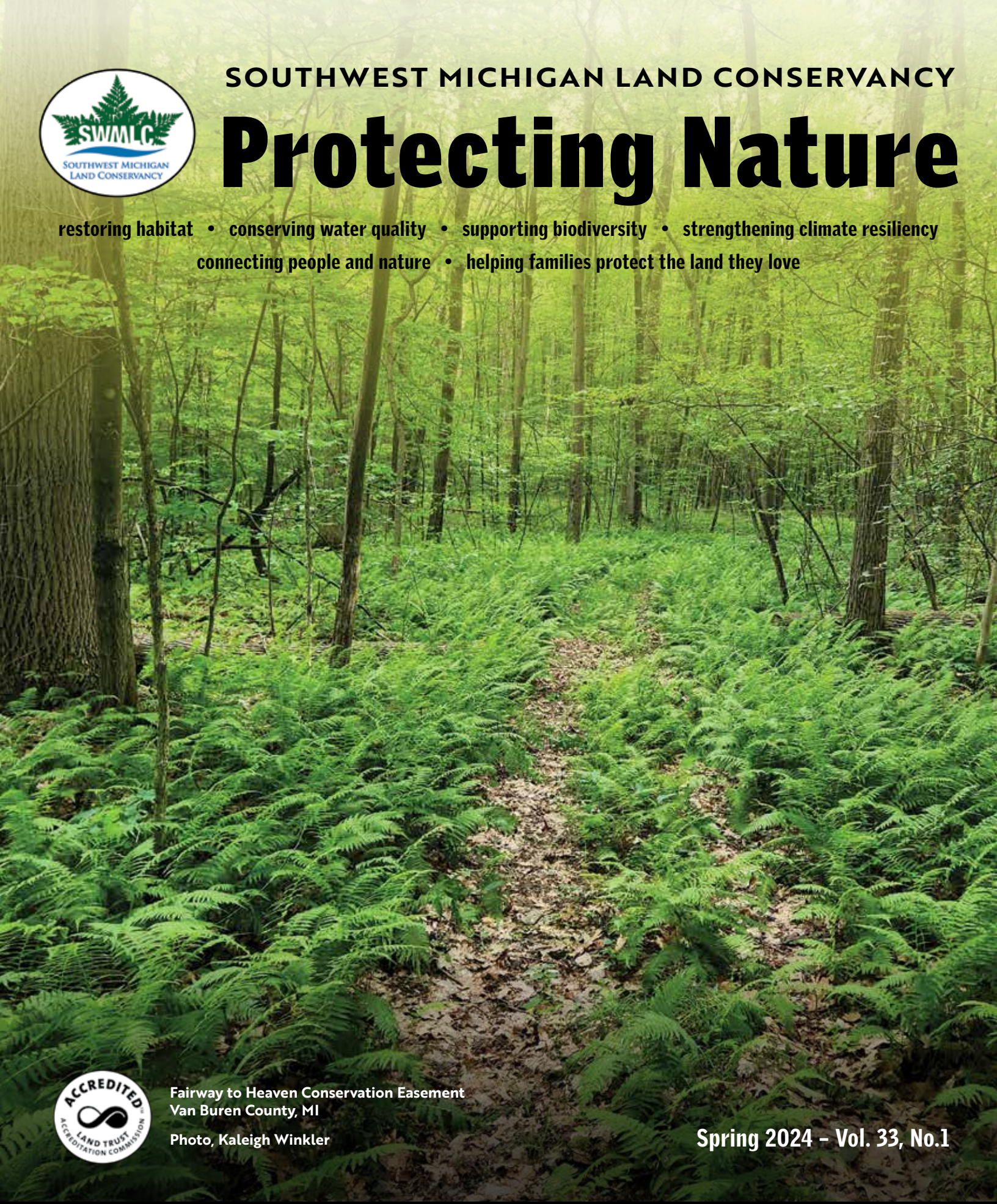
SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN LAND CONSERVANCY

Protecting Nature

restoring habitat • conserving water quality • supporting biodiversity • strengthening climate resiliency
connecting people and nature • helping families protect the land they love



Fairway to Heaven Conservation Easement
Van Buren County, MI

Photo, Kaleigh Winkler

Spring 2024 – Vol. 33, No.1

If we don't protect the land and water – *who will?*

This is a great opportunity for me to say thank you to everyone for all your help and support!

It's been an amazing year!

Michael Larson, President and Executive Director

Kesling Nature Preserve | Amelia Hansen

I can't believe that nearly a whole year has flown by since I started working for SWMLC!

What was once an overwhelming number of names, places, acronyms, and new terminology is finally falling into place – and I'm very grateful for the patience and grace that people have shown as I've gotten up to speed. What's energized me the most has been witnessing the passion and commitment of so many people that care about conservation in southwest Michigan . . .

. . . I'm continually impressed by our small but mighty staff. Hardworking and talented, they bring passion and expertise to their jobs, every day.

. . . I so appreciate SWMLC's Board of Directors. These special volunteers are 100% vested in our mission and actively engaged in making sure that SWMLC is impactful, today and tomorrow. And the generous response to last fall's Board Member Challenge, made by both current and past board members, was both remarkable and humbling.

. . . I'm amazed by the force of dedicated, knowledgeable, energetic volunteers that work alongside us. Behind the scenes, these folks help us evaluate new land protection projects, monitor conservation easements, do back-breaking habitat restoration work, and serve on special committees. We could not do our work without their vital contributions.

. . . I hadn't realized before just how many people pull together in support of a strong natural environment in southwest Michigan. **SWMLC is lucky to work with such a rich array of like-minded conservation partners:** people from other land trusts, local conservation clubs and organizations, other non-profit organizations, tribal governments, parks departments, local businesses, school districts, planning commissions, soil conservation districts, townships and municipalities, county and state governments, foundations, and grantors.

. . . and of course, I'm so very grateful to you: our members, donors, and supporters. I was blown away by your generosity during last fall's Force for Nature Campaign. Hundreds of people responded, demonstrating how important our conservation work is to the people who care about this region. Your support is critical to our success and we could not do what we do without you.

Thank you!

In more than 30 years of running non-profits, this last year has definitely been one of my most rewarding experiences, both personally and professionally. I feel that we're working together to build a place where people and nature can peacefully coexist, and that's so important. **We're gaining momentum with some exciting projects on the horizon, and I'm looking forward to working with you all in the next year.**

Mike Larson, SWMLC President and Executive Director • mlarson@swmlc.org • 269-324-1600 x307

New Projects on the Paw Paw

SWMLC receives Nonpoint Source Pollution Control Grant

Look at an aerial map and you will see the North Branch Paw Paw River as a dark green ribbon of tree tops cutting diagonally through the farm fields and rural neighborhoods of northwest Van Buren County. On foot, this area is wet, buggy, and wonderfully rich in plant and animal species – a quietly wild habitat that provides a corridor along which animals travel to find food, shelter, and mates. Protected from the axe by the mud, mature trees keep the water trout-cool with their shade and offer nesting sites to birds. It's not a place where humans like to spend time, but for the plants and animals – and water quality – it's vitally important that it be protected from development and pollution.

So, it's with gratitude that we announce that SWMLC has received another "319 Grant" from the State of Michigan to conserve even more ecologically-important parts of the Paw Paw River Watershed. The new project focuses on protecting two privately-owned properties with conservation easements, a combined total of 35 acres of upland, 57 acres of wetland, and 7,166 feet of natural river bank (nearly a mile and a half!). Both properties are located in 'high priority' areas as determined by ***Nature's Network*** (SWMLC's Land Conservation Plan) and the Paw Paw River Watershed Management Plan that was developed by SWMLC and conservation partners back in 2008. Protecting these properties from development prevents pollution of the North Branch from sediment, fertilizer, and pesticide runoff, which benefits both wildlife and people. SWMLC has been working in the Paw Paw River Watershed for many years now and looks forward to protecting even more areas in this critical zone.

Kaleigh Winkler

Dowagiac Fen Preserve, Nate Fuller

What are We Protecting?

A new grant will help us find out!

Protecting land sometimes requires quick action. External deadlines may push us to scramble, and though we always assess a property's natural features before conserving it, we rarely have time (or funding) to truly learn which plants, animals, and habitats are there. And that lack of knowledge makes it hard to shape strategies for restoring or conserving habitats. "Simply put, we need to know more about what we're protecting," said SWMLC Stewardship Director Mitch Lettow.

And soon we will – thanks to our conservation partners at Little Traverse Conservancy (LTC) (located in Harbor Springs, MI)! Generously, they included SWMLC in a grant-funded project to survey all 5,000 or so acres of protected land that we own. Beginning this spring, ecologists from Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) will walk SWMLC's properties, read the land, record the plants and habitats they find, and compare that with aerial photographs, soil maps, and other data. Understanding which plant grows where aids these experts in building habitat profiles that will help our Stewardship staff know where the high-quality areas are located, choose which restoration methods to use, focus invasive species removal, know where and when fire is the best tool, create rich biodiverse habitats, and identify the places where rare wildlife and plant species are most likely to be.

The maps and data from this project will provide an incredible foundation to help us understand our nature preserves and create opportunities for endangered species surveys down the road. When the project is finished, habitat data will have been collected from 25,000 protected acres on either end of the Michigan peninsula – and we will know better how to keep them healthy.

Thank you for this incredible gift, Little Traverse Conservancy!

Follow this QR code to see a cool StoryMap about MNFI's Integrated Inventory services!

IT'S OFFICIAL!

LaGrange Valley Wetlands
is SWMLC's newest and largest nature preserve.

Working with fantastic friends and partners like you makes us ever more hopeful for the future of conservation in southwest Michigan!

LaGrange Valley Wetlands | Mitch Lettow

SWMLC Land Protection Director Kaleigh Winkler, land owner Mark Harrison, and SWMLC President & Executive Director Mike Larson.

If snakes had voices, the massasaugas would be cheering! We're excited to announce that 457-acre LaGrange Valley Wetlands is now officially SWMLC's newest AND largest nature preserve!

The Cass County property has excellent eastern massasauga rattlesnake habitat and will play a vital role in the continued survival of this endangered animal, as well as many other amazing creatures and rare plants. Working with Edward Lowe Foundation, which owns the adjacent 2,000+ acre Big Rock Valley, we aim to provide the best possible habitat for them all.

Now that acquisition is complete, the "forever" job of habitat restoration and stewardship begins. Our stewardship staff have crafted a thorough strategy that immediately addresses the most aggressive invasive species on the property: the 20-foot-tall invasive grass called phragmites ("frag-mighties"). A recent drone survey across the entire preserve makes us confident that we can keep it out of the highest quality habitats in the near-term, and gradually reduce it to non-harmful levels over time.

We also surveyed the streams that form the preserve's lifeblood for any lasting impacts made by being under water for nearly 200 years (a 19th century dam was removed nearly 20 years ago, which drained Lake LaGrange and restored the flow of Dowagiac and Talkie Creeks.) Now we can help bring these waterways to a healthier state over time.

We're **VERY GRATEFUL** for contributions made by the Carls Foundation, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Edward Lowe Foundation, the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi, Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources, Cass County Conservation District, Cass County Parks and Recreation, land owner Mark Harrison, community members and neighbors, and the stunning generosity of more than 200 individual donors who made this project possible. **THANK YOU!**

Conserving LaGrange Valley Wetlands shows that when we all come together, we **CAN** protect rare and endangered species in our region – and the importance of doing so before it's too late.

A complete list of LaGrange Valley Wetlands donors will be printed in the upcoming Summer 2024 issue of *Protecting Nature*.

Learn more about LaGrange Valley Wetlands on our website: www.swmlc.org/its-official

PLEASE NOTE: Due to its extremely sensitive habitats, vulnerable plants and animals, lack of parking area or trail system, and year-round wetness, LaGrange Valley Wetlands is one of SWMLC's 'refuge preserves' with limited public access and is only open with permission from SWMLC.

Be a FORCE for NATURE!
SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN LAND CONSERVANCY

SWMLC MEMBERS ARE TRULY A FORCE FOR NATURE!

And your support makes us feel like the possibilities are endless!

A HUGE THANK YOU

to everyone who donated toward membership in SWMLC's recent year end appeal.

Your response was incredible!

Current and past SWMLC Board Members donated a remarkable $350,000 challenge and, in response, new and renewing SWMLC members donated over $500,000 toward matching it – an amazing total of $850,000!

With this crucial support, we can continue and grow the important conservation work we do together in southwest Michigan: protecting nature, restoring habitat, supporting plant and animal populations, building climate resiliency, storing carbon, conserving clean headwaters, and creating places where everyone can connect with nature.

Thank you for walking this conservation path with us. We can't begin to express how grateful we are for the overwhelming show of support you've made.

A complete list of new and renewing members from 2023 will be printed in the upcoming Summer 2024 issue of *Protecting Nature*.

Chipman Preserve | Nate Fuller

Freese Preserve, a Barry County property purchased with funding from Tyden Ventures. Drone photo by Keto Gyekis.

Some of SWMLC's land protection projects are headline-grabbers that rally the community and make us feel both proud and humble, projects like LaGrange Valley Wetlands or Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve.

But we also protect land and wildlife in quiet ways that fly under the radar – while still making a big impact on nature in southwest Michigan.

And impact is important, because the conservation task at hand in our region is huge. Natural land, waterways, and quality habitats are being lost at a rapid pace, pushing conservationists like us to work harder, bigger, faster. There's more to do than any one organization can handle. "It just seems silly (and impractical) for each of us to try to go it alone when we can join forces and not only make good things happen, but be more effective in our mission," asserts Mitch Lettow, SWMLC Stewardship Director.

Fortunately, southwest Michigan is rich in environmentalists, with lots of people working toward the same goals. SWMLC's conservation partners are as varied as the opportunities themselves and include other non-profit environmental organizations, volunteer groups, state and local governments, tribal governments, schools, camps, foundations, and private donors, among others. Combining our strengths makes things happen that would be impossible working solo.

Figuring out what role each entity plays requires friendly, frank answers to questions like: "Who should own this land?" "Who has the ability to protect it?" "Who will be the best steward?" "Who has the best skill set?" "Who is located nearby?" "Who can act before the deadline?" "Who can apply for the grant?" "Who can round up the money to make this happen?"

Conservation Planning

In 2009, SWMLC and an amazing group of conservation partners joined forces in hopes of protecting more land in an around the Barry State Game Area (BSGA), the second largest piece of public land in southern Michigan. Understanding that plant and animal biodiversity depends on large areas of connected habitat, they set a goal to identify the highest priority lands and conserve 2,000 more acres in and around the BSGA within ten years. And even though that ambitious timeframe has passed, we're closing in on the goal.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

SWMLC has frequently partnered with the Michigan Department (DNR) of Natural Resources Wildlife Division in planning and enlarging several of our region's state game areas, including Barry, Crane Pond, and Allegan. Our strengths and weaknesses complement one another. For example, the DNR works on a grander scale than SWMLC, has a different funding stream, and can apply for grants that are only available to units of government. But because they are a large agency with many careful procedures to go through, it can sometimes be difficult for the DNR to receive gifts of land or money, or to move quickly. Smaller and nimbler, SWMLC has purchased property with donor funds and held it until the DNR has been ready to receive it and pay us back.

Donor Partners

In Barry County, this amazing donor has been the conservation-minded family business Tyden Ventures. With the ability to move quickly, Tyden Ventures has been able to offer short-term, interest-free loans on land (or simply purchased it), enabling us to protect properties before they hit the market and are forever lost. Tyden Ventures has provided purchase funding for SWMLC's Carter Lake, Freese, Fenwood, Heath Road, and Hidden Pond Preserves – as well as a new project that's on the horizon. SWMLC has been extremely fortunate to have the generous support of Tyden Ventures and we will tell you more about these incredible donors in the future.

Personal Relationships

Sometimes SWMLC plays match-maker, acting as liaison between potential stakeholders. It's a delicate and intangible role, but a crucial one. For example, as part of state government, it can be more difficult for the DNR to establish and maintain personal relationships with landowners in the same way that SWMLC can.

continued on next page

Better Together! continued

Former SWMLC Conservation Projects Manager Emily Wilke nurtured many genuine relationships based on trust and spending personal time, including one with Treva Schoneboom, the owner of 371 acres that included the pristine headwaters of Glass Creek. SWMLC was able to give Treva the time she needed to make her decisions carefully at her own pace, so that when the DNR received the funding, Treva was ready to sell. Her property is now part of Barry State Game Area.

Streamlining Processes

When Andrews University in Berrien County wanted to sell 1,100 acres of rolling hills and wetlands along the St. Joseph River to the DNR back in 2018, they found that a thicket of red tape made covering the cost of an appraisal difficult. SWMLC eased the log jam by paying for it. Our role was small but crucial, and led to that land being added to Crane Pond State Game Area, where it is now protected and open to the public for recreation.

Applying for Grants

When Chikaming Township wanted to save three very expensive acres of Lake Michigan shoreline property from development, SWMLC provided support by securing a $250,000 challenge grant from The Carls Foundation, which wasn't available to municipalities. When this funding was combined with public donations, the project qualified for (and later received) a state trust fund grant that covered the purchase price, saving Cherry Beach.

Conservation Easements

Sometimes, a land owner wants that added layer of protection that a conservation easement (CE) provides, and SWMLC has covered that need on more than one occasion. SWMLC holds CEs on land owned by other area organizations, including Chikaming Open Lands' 43-acre Myron Perlman Nature Preserve, Kalamazoo College's 31-acre Lillian Anderson Arboretum, Kalamazoo County Park's 212-acre Arthur E. and Mildred H. Woollam Nature Preserve CE (the former Camp Rota-Kiwan), Kalamazoo Nature Center's 92-acre Coppertree CE, Pierce Cedar Creek Insitute's 555-acre Brewster Lake CE, and Sarett Nature Center's 280-acre Brown Sanctuary and 33-acre Black Woods. In turn, Land Conservancy of West Michigan (based in Grand Rapids) holds a CE on SWMLC's own W.E. Smith, Wau-Ke-Na Preserve, North Tract.

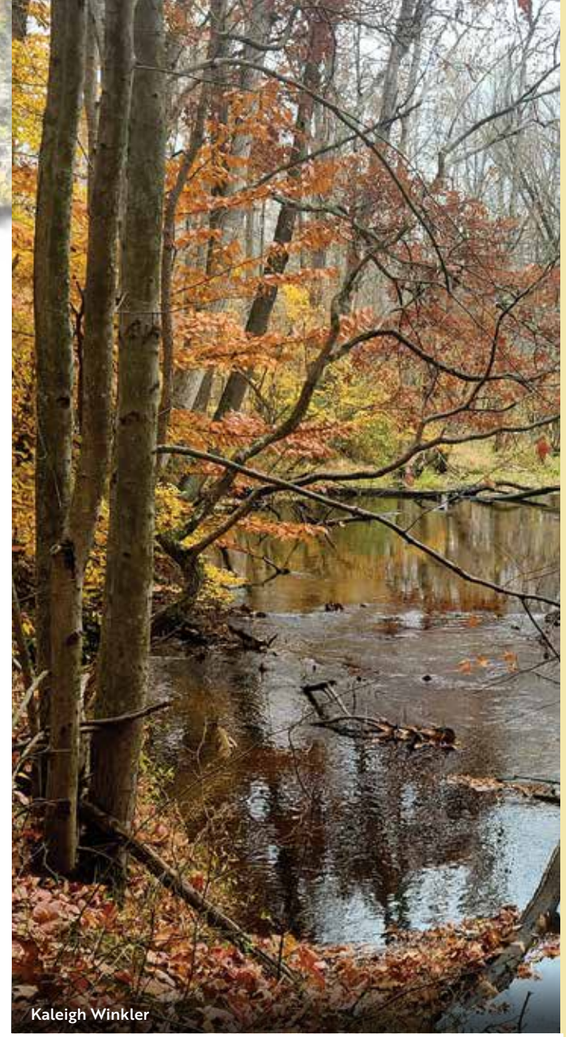
Trustee

In 2010, SWMLC was appointed special trustee of the Warren Woods State Natural Area and a large parcel within Warren Dunes State Park, which was critical to transferring ownership of those properties to the State while making sure that the original restrictions are always followed. SWMLC is the only land conservancy in Michigan to be granted this special trustee status.

Property Management Partnerships

We've also entered into win-win partnerships with South Haven Area Recreation Authority, which manages the infrastructure at Pilgrim Haven Natural Area and Porter Legacy Dunes, while SWMLC stewards the natural areas. Each of us plays to our strengths to create something better than we could do on our own.

Most of these under-the-radar projects have required as much of SWMLC's time, money, energy, and expertise as the big shiny projects – and we're just as proud of the results. As Kaleigh Winkler, SWMLC Land Protection Director puts it, "We're all working for the greater good, we all have the same goal: to protect nature." SWMLC has often been "Midwest modest" about tooting our own horn about our accomplishments – but if we don't, people won't know the full extent of our work. And we want you, our supporters, to know the true impact and difference **YOU** make for conservation in southwest Michigan when you support SWMLC – especially when we collaborate with conservation partners.



Kaleigh Winkler

SWMLC President & Executive Director Mike Larson, land owner Carol Harris, SWMLC Land Protection Director Kaleigh Winkler, SWMLC Land Protection Specialist Emily Brown

Fairway to Heaven

Another healthy chunk of land along the Paw Paw River has been protected forever, thanks to Carol Harris and her generous conservation spirit!

Not content to just love nature from the comfort of her armchair, Carol is a person who puts thought into action. A dedicated volunteer with SWMLC's weekly stewardship groups, the Privateers and Wednesday Warriors, Carol has taken her environmental commitment to a new level by protecting her land with a conservation easement held by SWMLC, and very generously donating the associated costs. She calls it the Fairway to Heaven Conservation Easement in honor of her late husband, Len, and his passion for golf.

As young newlyweds, Len and Carol camped their way through 49 states in a little hatchback before seeking land of their own in southwest Michigan's fruit belt in 1983. "Gorgeous!" was their reaction when they first saw the wooded property on the Paw Paw River, though Len's father thought buying it was a big mistake. Maybe for him – but it was perfect for Carol and Len. Here, they built their house together with help from family and friends, and lived happily for many years.

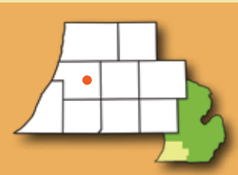
The 45-acre property is graced by upland oaks and hickories, nearly a half mile of frontage on the South Branch Paw Paw River, and 11 acres of swamp and floodplain forest – rich, wet habitats that burst with plants, insects, fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds, including threatened prothonotary warblers and red-shouldered hawks. Floodplain forests also guard water quality from soil-erosion pollution and absorb potentially damaging floodwaters.

Fairway to Heaven CE is located within five miles of 1,450 acres of conserved land (including three more private SWMLC CE's and our refuge preserves Paw Paw River and Dayton-Willard Wildlife Preserves), creating a network that allows wildlife to move freely through a protected landscape. The new CE is the final piece in SWMLC's three-year pollution control project aimed at protecting land within the Paw Paw River Watershed, recognized as a high-priority area in three different conservation management plans.

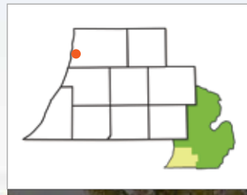
Thank you, Carol!

Your generosity and forethought are inspiring, positive ripples that will travel far into the future.

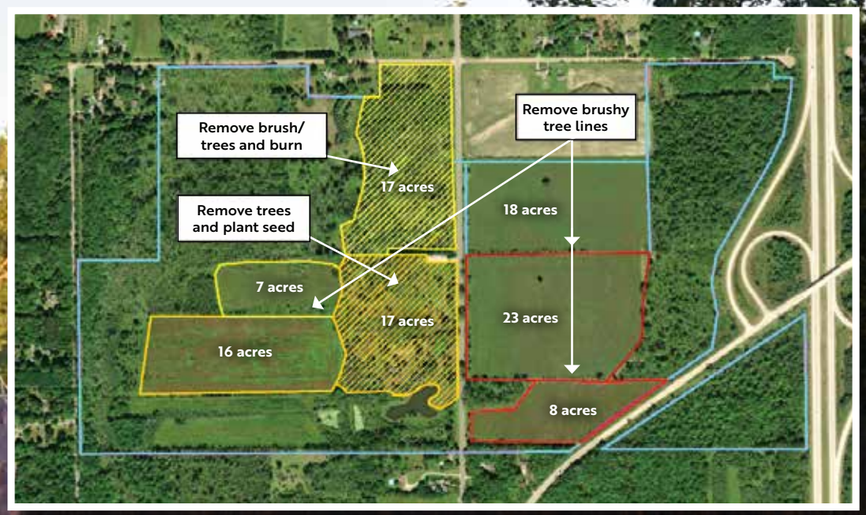
A conservation easement (CE) is a permanent, voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust. Carol will continue to own her property until she decides to sell or leave it to others, but the terms (which vary and are unique to each property) that conserve its natural features by restricting development are passed on with the deed and protected by the easement holder (in this case, SWMLC). Carol has the peace of mind of knowing that her beloved land will be protected forever, no matter who owns it in the future.



W.E. Smith, Wau-Ke-Na Preserve's Five-Year Plan



Learn more about Wau-Ke-Na North and South Tracts by visiting the Preserves page on our website: www.swmlc.org/public-nature-preserves



Map | Mitch Lettow

Imagine you're a migrating monarch butterfly, following the Lake Michigan coastline on unlikely papery wings, searching for places to rest and refuel. Your sensors tell you there are ample flowers in the prairie below, so you stop to check them out. You've found SWMLC's W.E. Smith Wau-Ke-Na Preserve, South Tract.

Nineteen years ago, a man named William Erby Smith did a wonderful thing: he donated 365 acres of prairie, wetlands, forests, farmland, and Lake Michigan shoreline to SWMLC. Divided into separate north and south tracts, he called them both Wau-Ke-Na (WKNA). With generous forethought, he set aside an endowment to protect, maintain, and enhance the land's special natural features and biodiverse habitats. With this endowment, SWMLC has turned farmland into prairie, removed invasive plants, maintained trails and infrastructure, and planted nearly 4,000 native trees. Looking ahead, we're eager to put a new set of initiatives into action that will continue this legacy of care.

Grasslands Initiative – Wau-Ke-Na South Tract

Imagine you're three inches tall and feathered. You search the grass for bugs to feed to your babies back at the nest. You belt out a song to warn others to keep out, this is your plot. Yours is a pretty good, open territory – except for the nearby tree line where hawks sometimes spy from the branches and lurking raccoons come in the night to look for food, including baby birds.

Recent studies show that grassland bird populations have dropped by a staggering 75% in the last 50 years, and desperately need help. Rare grassland species like bobolinks, Henslow's sparrows, savanna sparrows, eastern meadowlarks, sedge wrens, American kestrels, and Northern harriers need large, open spaces for successful nesting – and all these birds have been documented in WKNA-South's restored prairies. But the preserve's potential is stunted by the planted conifers, invasive shrubs, and old brushy tree lines that break the large areas into small ones. A grassland bird that needs 40 open acres to nest successfully may see a 50-acre prairie with a brushy tree line through the middle as two separate 25 acre prairies – neither of them large enough for nesting.

We want to unite these smaller habitats into one great big one to enhance the preserve's appeal to grassland birds. The initiative will begin by heavily thinning the tree lines, using prescribed fire to kill the invasive shrubs, and removing the overgrown "Christmas trees" that block these grassland connections. Planted prairie vegetation will fill the gaps in the tree lines, using a custom mix of grasses, sedges, and wildflowers that are fine-tuned for grassland bird species. When all of these future improvements are finished, WKNA-South's grassland complex will be over 100 acres – beyond the critical threshold that many of these bird species need to thrive!

Forest Initiative – Wau-Ke-Na North Tract

Imagine you're a sapling tree, planted by humans far away from your parent. Safely nurtured inside a plastic tube that protects you from rabbits and deer, you reach for the sky and unfurl your leaves in a burst of enthusiastic foliage at the top.

While the South Tract is open to the sky, WKNA-North is forested. Some of this is native tree species but, many years ago, about 30 acres were planted with non-native Douglas firs to replace an old orchard. These trees don't offer good wildlife habitat and are so poorly suited to our climate that most are diseased or dead. So, in an effort to turn this area into a diverse future forest that traps carbon and can survive in the face of climate change, SWMLC staff and volunteers planted nearly 3,000 individual trees and shrubs of 20 different native species in a 10-acre area between 2020 and 2022 (see the story in *Protecting Nature,* Vol. 30, No. 2). Over the next five years, we will continue this initiative by planting native trees in another 10 acres of this degraded habitat and create study areas to monitor the existing forest. In the coming decades, these climate-adapted forests will stretch their canopies to touch one another, creating young forest habitat, and shading preserve visitors as they leisurely walk the trail to the lake.

Infrastructure Initiative – Updating Buildings and Trails

WKNA-South's web of wet trails is admittedly a confusing puzzle. We aim to solve this issue by tangle-taming the trail system, re-routing where needed, and providing better info to visitors with a trailhead kiosk. We also plan to pull down two of the old buildings that are in poor shape, while improving the one that is structurally-sound with upgraded electricity and a frost-free water spigot.

Outreach – Elevate recognition of the critical role these preserves play in both ecological and human communities.

Imagine you're a human child scampering down the trail, excited to have a natural place to explore and look for colorful leaves, fancy fungi, and neat bugs.

We feel that Wau-Ke-Na and our other nature preserves are essential to the wellbeing of both people and wildlife – and want the community to understand the true value of these beautiful natural areas by using them, cherishing them, then translating that affection into support for all of SWMLC's important conservation work across the region.

One way to do this is by helping people understand the important role that a natural Lake Michigan coastline plays for migrating animals. Working with Kalamazoo Valley Bird Observatory, we plan to install a Motus radio telemetry tower, a device that tracks the flight of migrating birds, bats, and insects, then uploads the data to a an online public hub. Similar towers have been placed at many locations around the region to create an overlapping network that detects migrating animals as they fly by. A Motus tower at WKNA-South will collect critical information that fills a hole in that network, while also exciting and informing the public. Stay tuned for more about this in the future!

We're also very grateful for the vigorous efforts being made by SWMLC friend Mo Lewandowski to have WKNA officially recognized as a Dark Sky Park – an international designation that preserves dark night skies by identifying special locations with little to no light pollution. With miles of dark lake to the west and little inland development, we hope that WKNA has a very good chance. And because light pollution is also bad for migrating birds (which often fly at night), this designation would pair nicely with the rich habitat being created for migrating birds. If achieved, this status would provide a great platform for future community connections. (See more about Mo's work in the Summer 2023 issue of *Protecting Nature*).

William Erby Smith provided the vison and means to see that the two properties that make up WKNA remain valuable and critically important to our community of people and wildlife. We look forward to carrying that legacy into the future!

W.E. Smith, Wau-Ke-Na Preserve, South Tract | Amelia Hansen

Conservation Partnership *in Action*

SWMLC recently worked with the MI Department of Natural Resources to create the New Paw Paw River State Game Area

The property is rough, wet, and wild. Towering oaks and beeches greet visitors upon arrival, but the welcome mat is quickly snatched away by a dense fortress of vegetation, low-hanging branches, fallen trees, knee-deep mud, and mosquitoes that prevent hikers from ever reaching the Paw Paw River Mainstem that creates its southern border. It's not heavenly for humans, but its rich habitats are a paradise for wildlife, from turtles to deer to cerulean warblers.

"It's one of those places that deserves not to be touched by development," remarked Kaleigh Winkler, SWMLC Land Protection Director. And now it won't be, thanks to a collaborative effort made by SWMLC and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Division (DNRWD). In a press release, Mark Mills, Southwest Regional Manager for the DNRWD said, "We are thrilled for this land purchase, as it reinforces our dedication and the dedication of our partners to wildlife conservation and access to public recreation."

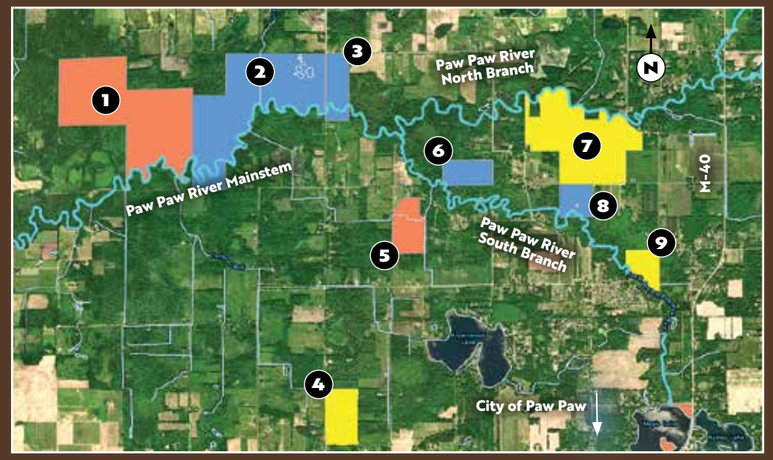
SWMLC acted as facilitator, intermediary, and co-strategist in a series of conversations between the DNR and the land owners over several years' time. We also covered appraisal and title search costs, for which we will later be reimbursed. The project was completed in February and the property will soon open to the public for hunting, fishing, and paddling as the DNR's new Paw Paw River State Game Area, the first of its kind in southern Van Buren County.

This property is strategically located within a 'conservation hub' (an area of critical focus) as determined by SWMLC's Climate Resiliency Plan, ***Nature's Network***. It's only a few miles away from other protected lands, including SWMLC's similarly wet and wild refuge preserves Sora Meadows (65 acres), Dayton-Willard (41 acres), and Paw Paw River Preserves (258 acres). Even closer are several private properties that are protected by SWMLC conservation easements (CEs), including Vogtmann-Leet (41 acres), Fairway to Heaven (45 acres), Jazz (56 acres), and Eureka (342 acres). Eureka CE is sandwiched between the new state game area and Jazz CE, creating 3.82 miles of natural riverbank and nearly 750 combined acres of protected land!

Connecting and conserving land in this conservation hub protects critical floodplain forest habitat and offers essential safe travel zones for animals, and places for plants to spread into. It also improves water quality by preventing pollution caused by silt and chemical runoff, preserving the habitats' flood-absorbing role, and recharging ground water supplies.

Protecting this big, beautiful, untamed land is a great example of how essential strong partnerships are for conservation in southwest Michigan.

Conservation Lands Near Paw Paw River State Game Area



- SWMLC Preserve
- SWMLC Conservation Easement (CE)
- Other protected land

1. New Paw Paw River State Game Area
2. Eureka CE
3. Jazz CE
4. Sora Meadows Preserve
5. Private land enrolled in federal conservation program
6. Fairway to Heaven CE
7. Paw Paw River Preserve
8. Vogtmann-Leet CE
9. Dayton-Willard Preserve

Map | Emily Brown

Matthew Paulson, Flickr

Southwest Michigan Team Birdathon 2024 is just around the corner!

Birdathon is a birdwatching competition/conservation fundraising event that demands the dedication of a monk, an accountant's attention-to-detail, and the snacking ability of a bear preparing to hibernate.

WHAT'S BIRDATHON AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

On Saturday, May 18th, SWMLC's "Land Larks" will scour Berrien County in competition with dozens of other regional teams to see who can spot the greatest number of bird species in one day. Last year's talented team returns with SWMLC's own Dave Brown, Mitch Lettow, and Kaleigh Winkler joined by Michigan Natural Features Inventory Conservation Biologist, Ashley Cole-Wick.

The Land Larks will wake up in the wee hours and travel to Berrien County in time to (hopefully) hear the pre-dawn calls of woodcocks and owls (and garbage trucks that sound like owls when backing up). They will then spend the day searching Berrien County for birds until 7 pm when all the teams gather to compare results.

Each team collects "pledges" toward a conservation cause from supporters. Supporters may make flat donations ("I'll donate $50 for conservation") or per-species pledges ("I'll give those lunatic Land Larks $0.50 for every species they find"). In the past, the Land Larks have observed 115-135 species during Birdathon, so a $0.50 pledge would be a $50-70 tax deductible donation.

WHAT'S SWMLC'S CAUSE THIS YEAR?

Proceeds from this year's SWMLC Team Birdathon will go toward trail improvements at Wolf Tree Nature Trails in west Kalamazoo county – which happens to also be a great place for birding! SWMLC staff and volunteers have worked on restoring Wolf Tree's oak-based woodland and open savanna habitats for about a decade now – and the birds have noticed. Local birders have reported finding 123 species at Wolf Tree on eBird, the online database for bird observations (www.ebird.org/home), including some that will surely perk up the ears of bird enthusiasts like broad-winged hawk, hooded warbler, and blue-winged warbler.

This popular preserve sees lots of visitors and, with all the love and use it receives, its trails are now in need of some repair. SWMLC Stewardship staff have identified 0.6 miles out of the approximately 2-mile long trail system that need redesign. A generous donor has committed $5,000 to this effort – and raising another $5,000 through Birdathon would allow us to fix the quarter-mile of trail that's most in need of TLC.

TO MAKE A PLEDGE OR DONATION

To make a flat donation, please visit the Birdathon 2024 page on our website at www.swmlc.org/birdathon-2024 or follow this QR code.

If you would prefer to make a per-species pledge, please send an email with Birdathon in the subject line to *conserveland@swmlc.org*, and let us know how much (e.g. "I'll give $1 for every bird species spotted"). You can make donations and pledges right up until the day of the competition, Saturday, May 18th.

Thank you for your support and commitment to conservation. Happy birding!

Donations • October 16, 2023 – January 31, 2024

The following contributions were made by people who want to make sure that there will still be wild places for future generations of people and wildlife.

Thank you! You make our work possible.

Honor Gifts

Bud and Judi Baldwin
In honor of Woody Boudeman

Pam Hjelmquist
In honor of father Kenneth Kirton for Christmas

Rick and Mary Hoffman
In honor of Nancy and Dave Clark

Robert and Joyce Leppard
In honor of the "trakkers"

Melanie J. Perry
In honor of the Trekkers

Barbara Leslie
In honor of Tom Georgoff's Birthday

David Dvorak and Karol Peterson
In honor of Sherwood "Woody" Boudeman

Brian and Katy O'Boyle
In honor of Robert O'Boyle on his 88th birthday.

Memorials

Mark and Cheryl Jenness
In memory of Donald Lawler

Garrard and Moira Macleod
In memory of George W. Macleod

Jeffrey Mohney
In memory of Russell and Justin Mohney

In memory of Dan Urich

Alan G. Mueller
In memory of Bessie Woolner

Judy Kraft Rowe
In Memory of Gary Stock

In memory of David Allen
Joe and Mary Licavoli
Rian Mintek
Mary and David O'Rourke
Tom and Linda Powell

In memory of Paul Locey
Elizabeth A. Fox
David and Jena Harvey
Ronald and Margaret Ingram
Ann Klobucar
Kathy and Michael Koets
Judith Roelof
Mary Rogers
Diane Schrock
William Speeter
Jon and Patricia Vandermeer
David Wiggins

In memory of Harold Schuitmaker
Martha and Gary Deuel
Jeffrey Mohney

In-Kind Donations

Landscape Forms
Hosting SWMLC's December 2023 Board Meeting/Strategic Planning Session

Mercer Advisors Wealth Management
Processing of stock gifts

Stolz Environmental Solutions, LLC
Phase 1 Environmental Site Assessment Report Update for LaGrange Valley

Gift Memberships

From Vita Benson
To Raye Polasek for Christmas

From Adriana Kniffin
To Brandon Bouwman

From Joey Miller and Paul Rehkopf
To Mary Vowell for Christmas

From Bruce and Jean Williams
To Rob and Julia DelSignore

To Travis and Sarah Simmons

Business Memberships

Cairnstone Adventure Tours
Cody Kresta Vineyard & Winery
Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph
Deer Creek Open Space Association
Edward Lowe Foundation
Kalamazoo Garden Council
Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum
Lutheran Church of the Savior
Petal Pushers Garden Club

Welcome New Members!

A complete list of new and renewing members from 2023 will be printed in the upcoming Summer 2024 issue of *Protecting Nature*.

Blue Green Society ($1000 sustaining)

Tim and Lyn Kool
Mike and Heather Larson

Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly ($1000+)

Richard Tetrault
Leslie Tung

Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake ($500+)

Esther Floyd
Thomas Huff
Raymond Syvert

Cerulean Warbler ($250+)

Anita De Young
David Hoppe
Cathy MacDonald
David Ohmart
The Shepard Family
Sally Sotos

Spotted Turtle ($100+)

Donna LeJune Bumgardner
Kathleen Cerveny
Susan and Paul Damon
Mark Hamburg
Richard W. Hodgman
Brooke Jaksa
Kathleen Kean
Adam Klingher
Dustin Matchinski
Katie Melvin
Jared Neterer
Chris and Kim Sargent
April Schmidt
Scott and Karen Sperry
Ed Thomas
Peter VanMeter
Lynn Weimeister

Little Brown Bat ($50+)

Kayla Allen
Michael Barillas
Dave and Pat Diget
Kathy Dunn
Thomas Michael Goshorn
Jessica Gray
Kristine Green
James Allan Guiette
Jared Allen Harmon
Kelly Kammeraad
Mel Luna
Jennifer Miller
Jared J. Mindock
Patricia Niewoonder
Andrew F. O'Boyle and Amy Kartch O'Boyle
Amy Poholski
Eric and Robin Pokornowski
James Patrick Shields
Taylor Snow
Lynette Stiemsma
Lawrence Toush
Homer Trecartin
Holly Vickers
Gay S. Walker
Sara Ware
Robert M. Weir

Grants

Benevity, American Online Giving Foundation
Benevity, UK Online Giving Foundation
Carls Foundation
Edward Lowe Foundation
Evergreene Foundation
Sarett Nature Center
The Judy Schincariol Memorial Fund
Sarett Nature Center
Scott and Sally Tyler Long Shadow Fund
The Lawrence and Sylvia -Wong Foundation

Matching Gifts

Pfizer Foundation Matching Gifts Program
Stryker Corporation

Gifts Beyond Membership

Anonymous (3)
Chuck and Jan Benner
Roselee Bundy-Hansen
David Coleman
Hastings Point LLC
Jim Hettinger
John and Maureen Lewandowski
Nancy Lowe
Jim and Paula Marcoux
Jacqueline McShulskis
James Motiff
Craig Shumaker
C. Glen Walter and Edite Balks Walter, MD

LaGrange Valley Wetlands Campaign

Donations received after October 16, 2023. A complete list will be printed in the upcoming Summer 2024 issue of *Protecting Nature*.

Nancy Acker
Aman and Susan Brar
Sally Esman
Todd and Deborah Fritz
Ronald Gunn
Mark Harrison
John C. Jenkins
Peter Kobrak
Patrick McKearnan
Joe and Shirley Mitchell
Debra Rappold
Mary Ann Ruesink
Lucinda A. Sebald and Andrew Van Doren
Ed Thomas

Chipman Preserve | Amelia Hansen

Show Your Love

by giving the gift of nature as part of your estate plan

Join the growing number of people who want to help ensure that southwest Michigan will always have quality, natural habitat available – for both wildlife and people. Share the peace of knowing that your passion for nature will live on, improving the lives of many future generations to come.

SWMLC welcomes planned gifts in many forms, including bequests, retirement plans, life insurance policies, and real property or development rights. By making a commitment to Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy as part of your estate plan, you will become a member of the Oak Legacy Society, joining other thoughtful supporters who have made a gift to our future and to the permanence of land conservation in southwest Michigan.

Feel free to contact us

If you're interested in discussing how you can accomplish your goals to leave a lasting gift, please call Miko Dargitz for a confidential conversation at 269-324-1600 x302, or email her at cmdargitz@swmlc.org.

Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy
SWMLC
Oak Legacy Society

Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy is a Michigan nonprofit corporation, with a principal business address of 8395 East Main St., Galesburg, MI 49053. Our federal tax ID number is 38-3038708.

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 Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy 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 by using this QR code or by typing: ***www.swmlc.org/membership***

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 Kristy Brooks at 269-324-1600 x309 or email her at kbrooks@swmlc.org.

What's with all the QR codes? We can fit so much more on our website than between the covers of the newsletter! Find extra content quickly by focusing your smartphone's camera at the QR codes, then tapping the link that's offered.

If we have accidentally omitted your name, or you find an error, we apologize. Please call Erin Decker at 269-324-1600 x308 so we can correct the mistake. Thank you.

Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy
8395 East Main St.
Galesburg, MI 49053

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Stewardship Technician

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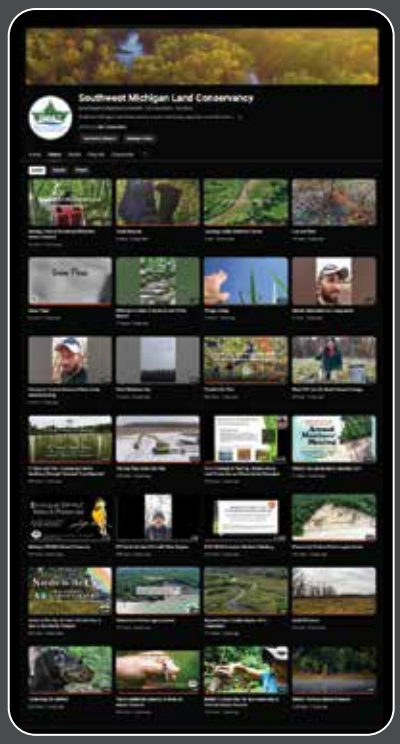
Watch the SWMLC YouTube Channel!

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then video must be worth a million!

From goofy shorts to fundraisers, heartfelt messages of thanks to scholarly presentations, video is an effective way for non-profit organizations like SWMLC to amplify our message and reach new audiences. SWMLC staff often shoot video clips while in the field *(and board member Keto Gyekis regularly supply us with gorgeous drone footage — thanks, Keto!),* then we edit in-house and share the final cuts on our social media platforms. SWMLC's homemade videos won't win any prizes at Sundance, but they are fun, informative, and an important way for us to tell our stories to the world.

Check them out by using this QR code or entering: www.youtube.com/@southwestmichiganlandconse4606



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