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

Good FireWoods
Van Buren County, MI

Learn more about SWMLC's newest refuge preserve on page 6.

Photo, Mitch Lettow

Fall 2024 – Vol. 33, No. 3

SWMLC protects nature in these Southwest Michigan counties:

Allegan • Barry • Berrien • Branch • Calhoun • Cass • Kalamazoo • St. Joseph • Van Buren

Photo: Erin Decker

Making Connections

Michael Larson,
SWMLC President and
Executive Director

Chipman Preserv, Galesburg

At SWMLC, fall marks the beginning of our fiscal year, a time for us to reflect upon and wrap up the past year, while looking ahead and preparing for the one to come. We've been busy putting together next year's board committees, workplans, and budgets – and in doing so, it's occurred to me that so much of our work is about making connections. Collaborating with partners so that our collective work is bigger than the sum of its parts. Linking protected properties to create bigger, healthier habitats. Studying the connections between good land management practices and their effects on landscapes. Strengthening ties between SWMLC preserves and our community, so more people can enjoy nature's benefits. Aligning conservation projects with donors who want to support that important work.

We've put a lot of thought and time into connecting our long-term goals with the strategic near-term work needed to achieve them, and we're excited to have recently completed our *SWMLC Strategic Plan 2024-2027* (see page 4). This plan is the result of a thorough, focused process involving our board and staff that helps us understand what we need to do to achieve our mission of "protecting, restoring, and caring for the vital lands and waters for people and wildlife in southwest Michigan – now and for generations to come."

We're all connected to each other and the world through woven strands of commitment, passion, and love for the things we hold most dear . . . healthy landscapes where plants and animals can thrive far into the future and beautiful natural areas where we can connect with nature and each other.

All this work is only possible because of you. Please show your support by making a gift to our year-end appeal and become a Force for Nature today!

Together, we will continue to protect and care for nature in southwest Michigan.

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

2024 Annual Members' Meeting

A rainy day doesn't keep SWMLC members away! A huge thank you to everyone who came to the slightly soggy Annual Members' Meeting this past August . . . it was wonderful to connect once again with old friends and welcome new ones into the group, knowing that everyone shares our passion for protecting nature in southwest Michigan. Thank you to our host, Landscape Forms, for graciously opening your doors and letting us completely take over a portion of your facility and garden. Your staff was super-helpful and very kind. And, shout-out to Georgia Leventis-Molina and her team from Kitchen & Kegs Catering by Latitude 42 Brewing Company! We heard nothing but compliments and, as always, you made it simple and easy for us.

We're fortunate to walk this conservation path with so many like-minded people: our members. Your financial support is crucial to our work, and your trust and enthusiastic interest keeps our fires lit. We could not do what we do without you!

Stewards of the Land Conference

We sometimes get so busy we forget there may be other ways to get things done. Popping that bubble is what peer conferences are all about: new ideas, different approaches, shared experiences, stories, questions, and making connections. Earlier this fall, SWMLC Land Protection Staff Kaleigh Winkler and Emily Brown, and Stewardship Staff Mitch Lettow and Dave Brown, talked shop with their counterparts from around the state at the Stewards of the Land Conference, hosted by Heart of the Lakes. Kaleigh observed, "It's always great to view the land protection process from a fresh perspective!" and Dave remarked, "It was really good to have conversations with longtime colleagues and build relationships with new ones." Mitch also gave a presentation on how citizen scientists are helping SWMLC better understand the needs of grassland birds in our preserves. He added, "It's easy to forget that our unique challenges, opportunities, and experiences are actually shared by a network of folks across the state – and we have so much to learn from each other!"

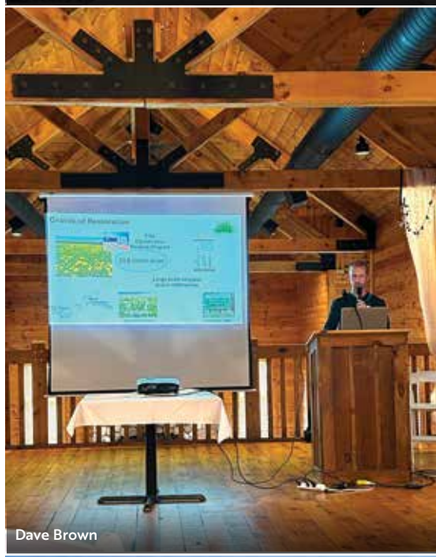
We're very grateful for these connections and the member support that makes such events possible!

Staff Hikes

Unleashed! Once a month, SWMLC staff have been replacing one of our weekly four-walls staff meetings with field trips to explore and learn more about areas where the organization is working. So far, we've gone to Portman Nature Preserve, Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve, Wau-Ke-Na W.E. Smith Preserves, and a Cass County property that we may protect in the future. Field trips like this are a fun treat for the staff – but they're more than just play, they're opportunities to build trust and enthusiasm. When work teams unplug and relax outdoors together, they reconnect with one another other and with the organization's mission.

Your support is what allows us to take these field trips that freshen our perspectives and build the cohesion we need to energetically continue our critical work protecting nature in southwest Michigan. Thank you!

Amelia Hansen



Dave Brown

Erin Decker

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

SWMLC's Strategic Plan 2024-2027

A strategic plan is a little bit like planning a road trip with friends to a faraway place . . . everyone's excited about getting there but a lot of questions need to be answered to make the trip a success. How much will it cost? What do we need to pack? Which route are we taking? How long will it take to get there? Where should we stop along the way? What do we want to do when we get there?

Having an intentional yet flexible plan in place is very helpful for us, too, aiding in aligning everyone's work and better understanding priorities. SWMLC's *Strategic Plan 2024-2027* is just such a document. With thoughtful input from board and staff, it will help us connect our long-term goals with the near-term work needed to reach them. Here is a brief overview of the plan.

The Strategic Plan has several facets. One is "Protecting More Land" using our *2020 Strategic Land Conservation Plan* to identify important places to conserve, especially those that link lands that have already been protected to create large, connected, biodiverse habitats. Protecting More Land also means looking for ways to work with conservation partners to increase the size of the conservation "pie."

Another important part of the Strategic Plan is "Stewarding and Restoring Land, Water and Biodiversity" – continuing to carefully and thoughtfully look after the land we've protected. Teaming up with the knowledgeable volunteers that monitor our conservation easements and those who perform vital stewardship in our preserves, we will develop and implement habitat management plans that help ensure our conserved lands are as healthy as possible.

"Preserving and Improving Access to Nature" is another priority of the Strategic Plan. People need nature for their physical and mental well-being, so we want to create more connections between communities and our 18 public nature preserves.

We can't achieve our goals without money, so "Fundraising for Financial Sustainabililty" is another important aspect of the Plan. We will emphasize expanding our network of existing and new individual donors, corporate philanthropists, state and federal grantors, and private foundations to secure the funding necessary to fuel SWMLC's conservation work into the future. Our new annual Force for Nature campaign helps create the foundation for SWMLC's financial sustainability.

Finally, the Plan includes "Ensuring Excellence in Operations and Governance," understanding the connections between our commitment to excellence, the strength of the organization, the quality of the lands we've conserved, and our ability to care for those lands in perpetuity.

For those who would like more detail, you can find a comprehensive version of this document on our website: www.swmlc.org/strategic-plan-2024-2027

A SWMLC MEMBER IS A FORCE FOR NATURE *and we need more of them!*

This fall, we are again kicking off our annual fundraising with a Force for Nature Membership Challenge to build the organizational strength, range, and flexibility we need to continue our critical conservation work.

Several donors have joined together to issue a challenge: for every dollar donated for SWMLC membership between now and December 31st, they will match up to $250,000, doubling the impact!

Membership support is at the heart of everything we do. If you're not yet a member, won't you become a SWMLC Force for Nature today?

And if you're already a member, would you consider renewing your membership at the next level up?

With your help, we can meet the challenge!

Your gift of $100 today means $200 toward:

- **Increasing climate resiliency**
- **Restoring habitat**
- **Ensuring water quality**
- **Supporting biodiversity**
- **Connecting people and nature**
- **Helping families conserve the land they love.**

YOU ARE A FORCE FOR NATURE

Show it with a SWMLC Membership today!

Giving is easy – just return the envelope in the center of this newsletter
OR scan this QR code (www.swmlc.org/membership)
OR watch your mailbox (if you're already a donor)!

Osprey photo, Aaron Kortenhoven
Force for Nature illustration, Amelia Hansen

Good Fire Woods

Carrying forward the conservation vision of Gary Stock in the Paw Paw River Watershed.

American Columbo is just one of the rare savanna plants that have been found growing at Good Fire Woods. It can take as many as 15 years to reach a height of 8 feet or more. It then flowers just once - often synchronized with other columbos in the area - sets seeds (pods seen here), then dies. Photo, Amelia Hansen.

SWMLC recently acquired a new property in Van Buren County that was previously owned by one of our founders, Gary Stock, who sadly passed away in 2023. With it came a large cardboard box packed with Gary's incredible data: meticulous records, handwritten letters, collector's permits, newspaper clippings, photocopies from books, and hundreds of photos – all documenting the parcel's flora and fauna. That box is a testament to Gary Stock's stewardship and love for the land.

Conservation Value

The hilly 135-acre property is home to several kinds of rare animals and plants, and was once covered by healthy oak savanna – a fire-adapted, open habitat of grasses, wildflowers, and scattered oak and hickory trees that used to be southwest Michigan's signature landscape. Nearly all oak savannas are now gone, having been turned into cemeteries, farms, villages, and housing developments. In the ones that remain, decades of modern fire control have created an unhealthy landscape of shade-loving trees and shrubs. But conservationists were excited to catch glimpses of Good Fire Woods' oak savanna heritage, despite it's being overgrown. "We were ecstatic to find rare savanna plants growing here, scattered throughout the remaining open areas of the property," explains SWMLC Conservation & Stewardship Director Mitch Lettow, adding that, in the future, SWMLC will thin these overgrown areas, and carefully use prescribed fire (aka "**good fire**") to bring the oak savanna back to life.

Good Fire Woods is located within the Paw Paw River Watershed, which is known to be one of the most intact and diverse watersheds remaining in southern Michigan. It includes 175 miles of rivers and streams, 5,800 acres of lakes and ponds, and flows more than 60 miles from its headwaters in Kalamazoo County to its end in the St. Joseph River near Benton Harbor. This huge, important area drains, filters, and recharges groundwater from 445 square miles. Good Fire Woods includes more than 1.5 miles of stream frontage on the Paw Paw River's East Branch and another coldwater stream that begins nearby in a privately-owned prairie fen wetland that's protected by a conservation easement held by SWMLC. The many bends made by the East Branch as it flows quickly through the property create a variety of habitat features like riffles, runs, and pools that support a thriving river ecosystem. The mature forest along its banks provides important, cooling shade for coldwater fish and the aquatic insects they consume while helping to prevent erosion that otherwise would pollute these waters with soil runoff.

Importance of Habitat Connectivity

Several years ago, SWMLC created the *Strategic Land Conservation Plan* that identifies some of the most critical areas for us to focus our conservation work to help our region become more climate resilient. Good Fire Woods is located within one of these important zones, and is part of a corridor of conserved natural land along the Paw Paw River and its tributaries that has already been protected by SWMLC and its conservation partners. When combined with other nearby natural lands like the recently created Paw Paw River State Game Area, nearly 500 acres have been conserved in this area. "The natural landscape in southwest Michigan has been broken into many small, separate pieces through human use, so conserving and stewarding Good Fire Woods is especially significant because it creates an important connection along this unique corridor where native plants can spread freely and wildlife can safely travel," remarked Kaleigh Winkler, SWMLC Land Protection Director.

Personal Connections

Not only does Good Fire Woods contain high-quality natural features, it also has strong human connections for SWMLC. The property's former owner, Gary Stock, was one of our founders, part of a local group that was so concerned about losing our region's wild places that they created SWMLC. A passionate conservationist, he purchased several smaller pieces of land in the early '90s that now make up Good Fire Woods in an effort to safeguard the many creatures living there. To ensure the reunited landscape remained intact, he worked with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to protect the property with a conservation easement in 2007. But stewarding 135 acres is no small feat, so Gary felt it was important that another trusted organization, SWMLC, be there to carry his legacy of active habitat management and care for his beloved land. Gary had been working with SWMLC for several years before his passing, and we're grateful to be able to carry out his wishes through the resources he thoughtfully put in place, and with the generous donations made by SWMLC's members and supporters. We're also excited to continue our partnership with TNC to achieve the highest level of protection for this property, where we assume the ownership and land stewardship, and TNC provides continued oversight with a conservation easement. "We're pleased that Gary's vision for the property as a preserve has been realized and happy to remain in close partnership with SWMLC," said Emily Clegg, TNC's Director of Land and Water Management, Michigan.

"Protecting Good Fire Woods brings us full circle, from Gary Stock's role in founding our organization back in 1991 to seeing his vision through today. We're honored to be able to continue his legacy of conservation in this way," stated Mike Larson, President and Executive Director at SWMLC.

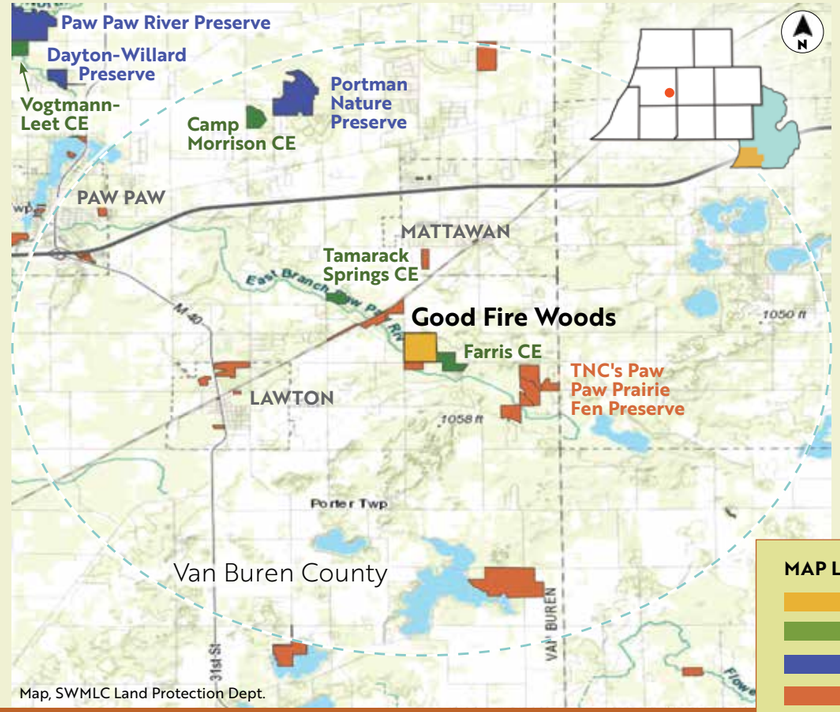
continued on next page

Fire is so critical to achieving our vision for this special natural area that we've included it in its name!

The term "Good Fire" (also known as prescribed fire) acknowledges its intentional use as a tool for improving habitat by the original Indigenous caretakers of this landscape. By burning with purpose – in the right place, season, and weather conditions – flames were kept small, creeping through the forest ground-layer, burning old sticks and leaves, stimulating fresh plant growth, and leaving large trees unharmed.

The benefits of Indigenous fire culture were and are many. Native blueberries and huckleberries yield greater harvests after fire. Hunting is improved because fire consumes loud crunchy dry leaves and encourages the rapid growth of tender, nutritious shoots which attract deer.

This positive concept of fire may surprise some people who see it as bad and dangerous. Ironically, our society's negative view of fire contributes to damaging wildfires. Over a century of stamping out flames instead of tending them has allowed dry vegetation to built up, so that when fires do inevitably occur, they are far more destructive. Used correctly, fire is an incredible tool that addresses issues like rebuilding groundwater supplies, carbon sequestration, and the ongoing biodiversity crisis. And if we don't restore fire to our culture, we won't restore the wild places and life that depend on it.



Map, SWMLC Land Protection Dept.

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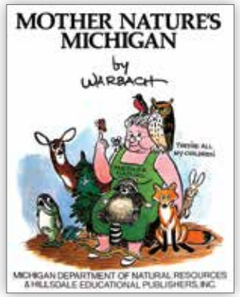
Good Fire Woods will be added to SWMLC's portfolio of refuge preserves, meaning that public access will be limited by appointment only. Nevertheless, the community will benefit from the clean air and water that it helps provide, and the diversity of plants and animals that call this special place home, protected forever by SWMLC and TNC for future generations.

Thank you, Gary.

MAP LEGEND

- Good Fire Woods
- SWMLC Preserves
- SWMLC Conservation Easements (CEs)
- Other recreation and conservation land
- 5 mile radius

SWMLC PRESENTED WITH THE OZZ WARBACH AWARD!



SWMLC is humbled and proud to receive the Ozz Warbach Award for Outstanding Partnership from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR). It's such an honor to be recognized in this way – we didn't see it coming! We feel the DNR has been an equally great partner, we just don't have an award to give them! The DNR posted on social media: *Last month, we awarded the Ozz Warbach Award for Outstanding Partnership to Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. This honor celebrates their exceptional work in conserving natural resources and enhancing wildlife habitats in southwest Michigan*

Mark Mills, Regional Supervisor for the Michigan DNR Wildlife Division, presented the award to SWMLC President and Executive Director Mike Larson during the celebration event marking the conservation of the Boys & Girls Club of Kalamazoo's former camp property in Barry County.

Key achievements include:

- *Conserving nearly 6,132 acres in Barry County.*
- *Assisting DNR with multiple major public land acquisitions, such as the recent creation of the Paw Paw River State Game Area and the expansion of Barry State Game Area, including the purchase and donation of a 200-acre parcel (Boys & Girls Club of Kalamazoo's former camp property).*
- *Leading and integrating a partnership of public and private landholders to create the Barry State Game Area conservation plan.*

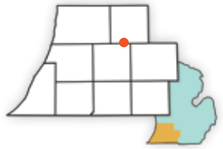
We celebrate SWMLC's dedication and thank them for their vital conservation efforts.

SWMLC is very grateful to receive the award – and to work with such incredible conservation partners.

THANKS, MICHIGAN DNR!

More Conservation Coming Soon to Augusta Creek Watershed

SWMLC is happy to announce that we were recently awarded a "319" grant!



The funding from this large grant will enable us to work with private landowners to create conservation easements that protect streams, wetlands, and uplands in the headwaters of the Augusta Creek Watershed in Barry County. Augusta Creek and its tributaries are spring fed by groundwater – so it's essential to protect the natural cover of the surrounding land to keep pollution from entering the system, whether that comes from lawn chemicals, farm runoff, leaky septic tanks, or parking lots.

For you those who love detail, "319" grants (officially called Michigan Department of Environment,

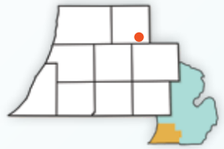
Great Lakes, and Energy NonPoint Source Program Implementation Grants) use both state (Clean Michigan Initiative) and federal (EPA under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act) funding to protect high quality waters from "nonpoint source" pollution. What's nonpoint source pollution? It's when the pollution comes from so many different things that it's hard to track the source . . . but researchers know when water has been affected by it when they find increased silt; fewer kinds of plants, invertebrates, and fish; too-warm water temperatures; and when analysis reveals nasty stuff like excess nitrogen, phosphate, and E.coli (aka poop bacteria). SWMLC has previously managed eight nonpoint source land protection projects with EGLE funding, including those in the Black River, Glass Creek, and Paw Paw River Watersheds.

Many thanks to EGLE for awarding us this grant funding. And kudos to SWMLC Land Protection staff Kaleigh Winkler and Emily Brown, who worked through the very complicated grant proposal process. SWMLC will be working on these new Augusta Creek Watershed projects in 2025, so stay tuned for developments further on down the line. We look forward to getting started!

KaleighWinkler

Bailey Nature Preserve

A new public nature preserve is coming to the area!



SWMLC and Barry County Parks are excited to announce the creation of the new 160-acre Bailey Nature Preserve as Barry County's newest park, located just 7 miles north of Battle Creek. When they donated their land over 20 years ago, David and Eleanor Bailey envisioned a beautiful place where local people, especially kids, could have access to nature. Now, this conservation collaboration makes their dream into reality!

Earlier this spring, the City of Battle Creek transferred ownership of the property to Barry County Parks and, over the next year, SWMLC will draft a conservation easement to ensure the property's natural areas, which include 35-acre Metcalf Lake, will be protected forever.

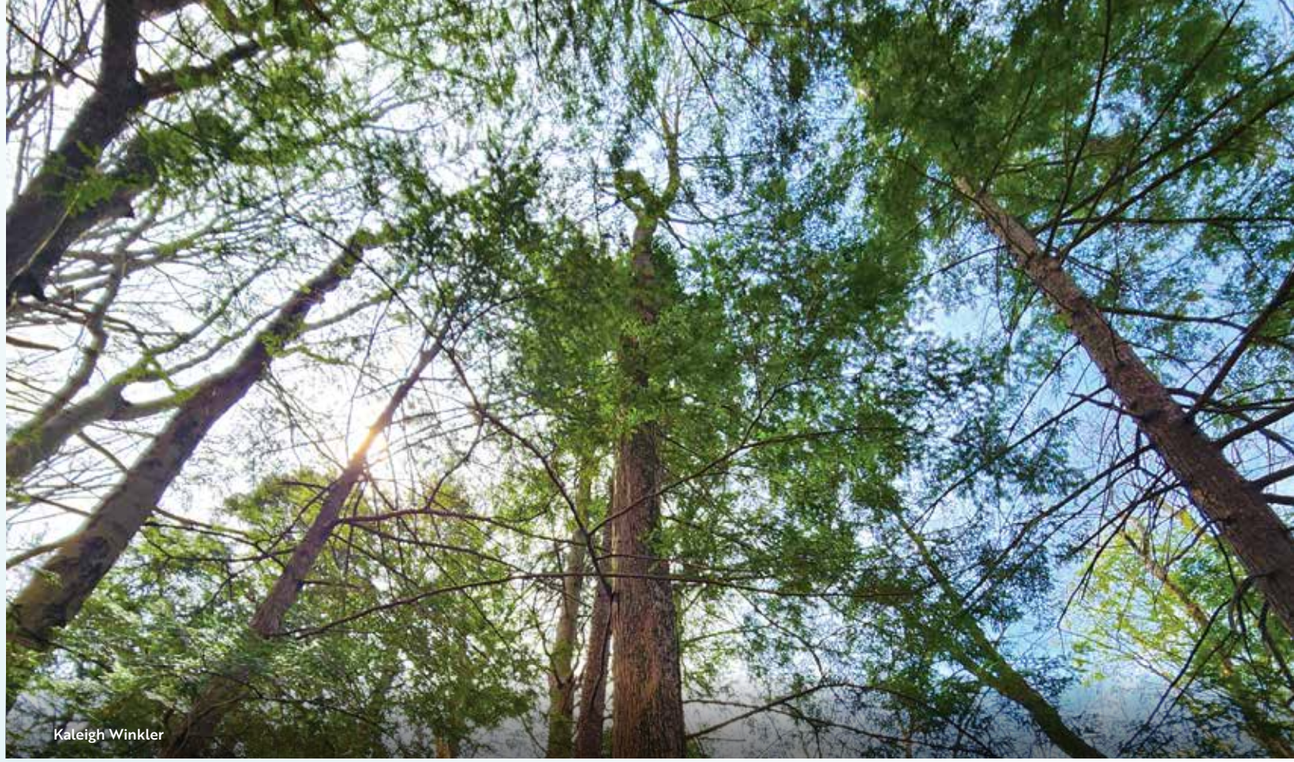
"SWMLC is incredibly grateful to all of the partners who came together to bring this project to fruition, including the Bailey Family, Barry County Parks, the City of Battle Creek, the Barry Community Foundation, the Barry Conservation District – and the many neighbors and friends who attended the Metcalf Lake Community Day, completed surveys, and provided their feedback and ideas," stated SWMLC President and Executive Director Mike Larson.

"Our parents loved this land and the community that surrounds it, and it holds a very special place in the hearts of our family," expressed daughter Wendy Bailey Hamilton and son David Bailey, Jr. "This property helped to shape our family's love for nature, and now that it will be protected forever, we hope that it will do the same for many future generations of people in Battle Creek and Barry County."

"We are thrilled to permanently conserve this beautiful property and look forward to Bailey Nature Preserve becoming a favorite local haven for people and wildlife," emphasized Barry County Commissioner Catherine Getty. "We would not have been able to add this newest Barry County Park without the steadfast commitment and tireless dedication of Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy."

Both SWMLC and Barry County Parks look forward to the preserve's grand opening . . . please stay tuned for details!

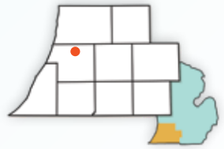
Keto Gyekis



Kaleigh Winkler

Hultmark Addition

SWMLC recently added three acres to an existing preserve. It's a small addition, with a big story behind it . . .



The love that Gordon and Sarah Delle Hultmark felt for their land comes through in a hand-drawn map that affectionately shows the location of a surprising patch of orchids and the spot where clubmoss grows thick. It showed when they donated three acres of it to Michigan Nature Association (MNA) in 1981 – and asked that the preserve's name honor their daughter Rifka who had passed away at age eight, calling it the Carolyn and Rifka Sharon Hultmark Memorial Plant Preserve.

Back in 1991, the Hultmarks were part of a group of concerned citizens that formed a new land protection organization called Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy in response to increased development in the region. Two years later, the couple donated 23.5 acres to SWMLC to create the young organization's very first preserve, Sarah Delle Hultmark Preserve. In 2008, Gordon donated an additional seven acres. The 30+-acre Van Buren County refuge preserve has provided an important sanctuary for wildlife and plants for the last 31 years.

But in the generous act of donating their land to SWMLC, the Hultmarks also created a land locked island out of that three-acre preserve named for Rifka. It had no road access, so MNA had to get permission from SWMLC or neighboring land owners to get to their own preserve. It just didn't make sense, especially since it shares a border with SWMLC's larger preserve.

So, this past spring, MNA graciously donated that three-acre piece to SWMLC, increasing the size of our Sarah Delle Hultmark Preserve to 33+ acres.

Sarah and Gordon both passed away a long time ago, but their legacy lives on. Protected forever, the preserve's rich diversity of tall beeches and hemlocks, unspoiled wetlands, abundant wildflowers, and wild rice pond will continue to provide essential habitat for future generations of wildlife.

Thank you, Michigan Nature Association!

Infrastructure Updates!

SWMLC protects nature in nine southwest Michigan counties, and has public preserves in seven of them. Just like our refuge preserves, public preserves provide vital habitat for wildlife and we put tremendous effort into improving and restoring these natural areas.

But public preserves also offer vital habitat for people! Many studies now prove that spending time in natural settings is essential for good physical and mental health. At SWMLC, we believe this is so important that our public preserves are open everyday for everyone in our community without admission fees (though our new signage strongly suggests becoming a member or making a donation).

Public preserves also act as "ambassadors" that introduce visitors to our organization. Many people still don't know who SWMLC is, what we do, or understand that our preserves are not owned by a government body but instead by us, a local nonprofit organization that works hard to ensure that our region is a place where people and nature can live in health and harmony.

To that end, SWMLC's Stewardship staff have been crazy-busy this past summer making improvements at some of our public nature preserves – and we encourage you to check them out for yourself! Find maps, directions and other info on our website: www.swmlc.org/public-nature-preserves

Dave Brown

Video still of Dave Brown, Amelia Hansen

Buildings cleared at Wau-Ke-Na

It was bittersweet but also time: this past August, we hired a team from Generation III Excavating to knock down two of the old buildings at Wau-Ke-Na W.E. Smith Preserve - South Tract to make room for an expanded grassland habitat restoration project.

Grassland bird populations are on a steep decline nationwide. Species such as bobolinks and meadowlarks that prefer wide open spaces for nesting have been seen at Wau-Ke-Na, so SWMLC is trying to make the grassland habitat bigger and better by removing old hedgerows, non-native spruce trees, and aggressive shrubs. Razing these decrepit buildings makes the human footprint smaller and reduces the area we have to disturb by mowing, which will hopefully make the preserve even more enticing to these birds.

But Wau-Ke-Na aficionados need not worry – we didn't remove all the buildings! We've kept the largest and best one, and given it some upgrades that increase its value for both storage and as a potential location for future events. Someday, if we're lucky, we may even see a meadowlark sweetly singing from its roof!

New trailhead at Wolf Tree

Wolf Tree Nature Trails has had a glow up! Visitors are now greeted by bright, bi-lingual, centrally located information that includes a trail map, dos and don'ts, a bit about habitat restoration, a brief introduction to SWMLC's conservation work, and a request for support. There's also a beautiful bench (dedicated to former SWMLC Board member Betty Lee Ongley) for resting, meeting friends, or picking sticktights off your socks.

Our hope is that the kiosks help create a safe, comfortable outdoor experience for visitors and hopefully make them curious enough to visit our website to learn more about us – and maybe become member/supporters while they're there.

Trail Rehab x4

Most of our public preserves come with legacy trail systems that were fine for the light foot traffic of their former owners, but slowly fail over time with increased public use. Recently, SWMLC's Stewardship team worked with our friends at TrailSense to come up with long-lasting solutions to trail erosion issues at four of our most popular preserves: Black River and Chipman Preserves, Spirit Springs Sanctuary, and Wolf Tree Nature Trails. As Stewardship Specialist Dave Brown said, "We want to blend top-notch trails for people with high-quality habitat for wildlife at our public preserves. Managing trail systems is not separate from habitat management: if you do it poorly, wildlife suffers, too"

In some places, TrailSense closed portions of old tracks and built sturdy new connectors.At others, they rehabbed existing trails by adding gentle humps, dips, and curves that slow the water down and direct it off the path to curb erosion. The results are lovely footpaths that allow walkers to relax and enjoy the scenery rather than focusing on their feet.

Find lots more photos and info about these projects on our website, plus links to a couple of videos we made about them. www.swmlc.org/infrastructure-improvements-24

Mitch Lettow introduced Wolf Tree's new trail on a short video.

Keto Gyekis

Portman Causeway Repairs

Heavy equipment tracks, trees uprooted, dirt torn up . . . the work we're doing on the trail that runs alongside Mud Lake at Portman Nature Preserve isn't pretty. But the earthen dam beneath the trail has begun to fail and repairs are needed to sustain its safety and soundness, and for the sake of the wetlands on either side. This repair project will improve the dam's strength, protect wetland health, and allow continued safe public access to the preserve's full trail system.

Working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Phase 1 work was completed this fall. It included removing vegetation from the lake side of the dam, replacing the tattered old culvert pipe with a new, better-positioned one, and installing a water control device that will allow us to manage the water depth in Mud Lake.

In Phase 2 next spring, the water control device will slowly be opened over several weeks' time to gradually lower the depth of Mud Lake. To prevent potential contamination from off-site materials, mud and gravel will be scooped from the lake bottom and used to build up the earthen dam, which will then be topped with crushed stone. When the work is completed, lake levels will be adjusted, leaving a stronger dam, thriving wetland, and continued safe gateway to all of Portman's trails.

Follow this ongoing story on our website: www.swmlc.org/portman-causeway-repair

www. swmlc.org/membership

Projects like these are only made possible through the generous support of our members, regular folks that just want to make a positive impact on the environment. If that's you, please join us in protecting, restoring, and caring for southwest Michigan's vital lands and waters – now and for generations to come. With a SWMLC membership, you are a Force for Nature!

Beth Keith, Citizen Scientist

This AudioMoth recorder/microphone can capture high frequency bat calls between 30 and 50 kilohertz (above the range of human hearing).

Photos, Amelia Hansen except where noted otherwise

Bat Monitoring at SWMLC Preserves

The katydids and crickets can be so loud on summer evenings that people sometimes have to shout over them. But if humans could hear the hunting calls of bats, nighttime would be deafening!

Bats use "echolocation" to find their prey, chirping at frequencies too high for humans to hear, then reading the size, shape, and distance of objects from the sounds that bounce off them. If it's a tasty insect, the bat chirps faster and faster, zeroing in on the prey until they can snatch it from the air. It's these high frequency "pulses" that citizen scientist (and Kalamazoo Valley Community College horticulture instructor) Beth Keith listens for.

Of course, Beth can't hear them herself, but her AudioMoth ultra sonic microphones can. She currently has them at two SWMLC refuge preserves, Woodlawn and Augusta Floodplain Forest, plus a blueberry farm, Wolf Lake Fish Hatchery, and downtown Kalamazoo. Beth begins monthly monitor checks in April, recording up to seven 12-hour nights of data, then sends the season's files to the Midwest Bat Hub of the North American Bat Monitoring Program in October with no idea what's on the recordings. The Hub will add her results to those gathered by other citizen scientists to create maps and other data that describe trends in bat populations.

8,450 bat calls recorded . . .

at five SWMLC preserves and Mitchell's Blueberry Farm

It's an exciting day when the results come back in January! In 2023, Beth recorded nearly 8,450 bat calls at six locations (five were SWMLC preserves). Woodlawn had the highest number (4,814), followed by SWMLC's Armintrout-Milbocker Nature Preserve with 1,578. 62% were made by big brown bats, 19% by hoary bats, 11% by eastern reds, and 8% by silver-haired bats.

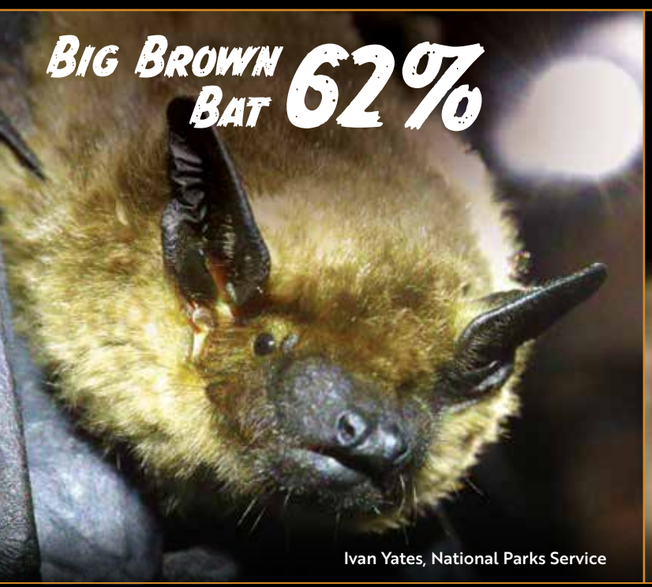
Bats are threatened by habitat loss, diseases (like white nose syndrome), and, in some areas, wind turbines. Beth is fascinated by them and wants to help through her work as a citizen scientist, "I'm very excited about the contributions I've been making but still wish I could do more." She's pleased to see increased interest in bats and sometimes leads night walks with a handheld monitor that receives calls in real time, adding an exciting element.

We're thrilled that Beth (and other citizen scientists) are conducting their invaluable research at our preserves, helping us better understand which animals and plants are there, and what we can do to help improve biodiversity.

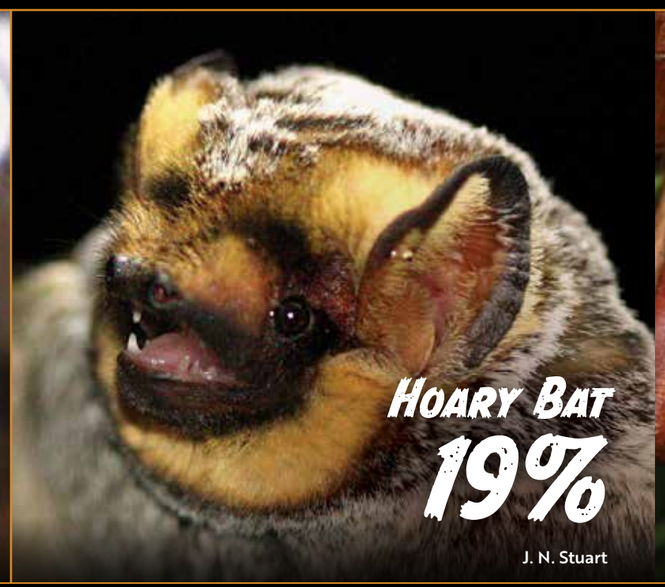
Beth's recording device, mounted to a tall pole at Woodlawn Preserve.

For more information about volunteering with the Bat Hub: www.midwestbathub.nres.illinois.edu

Want to know more about bats and how you can help them? Check out Bat Conservation International's website: www.batcon.org



Ivan Yates, National Parks Service



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Judy Gallagher

JOSE_MARTINEZ_FONSECA_SVALDVARD-2016

>> Past and Present SWMLC Staff Publish Journal Article <<

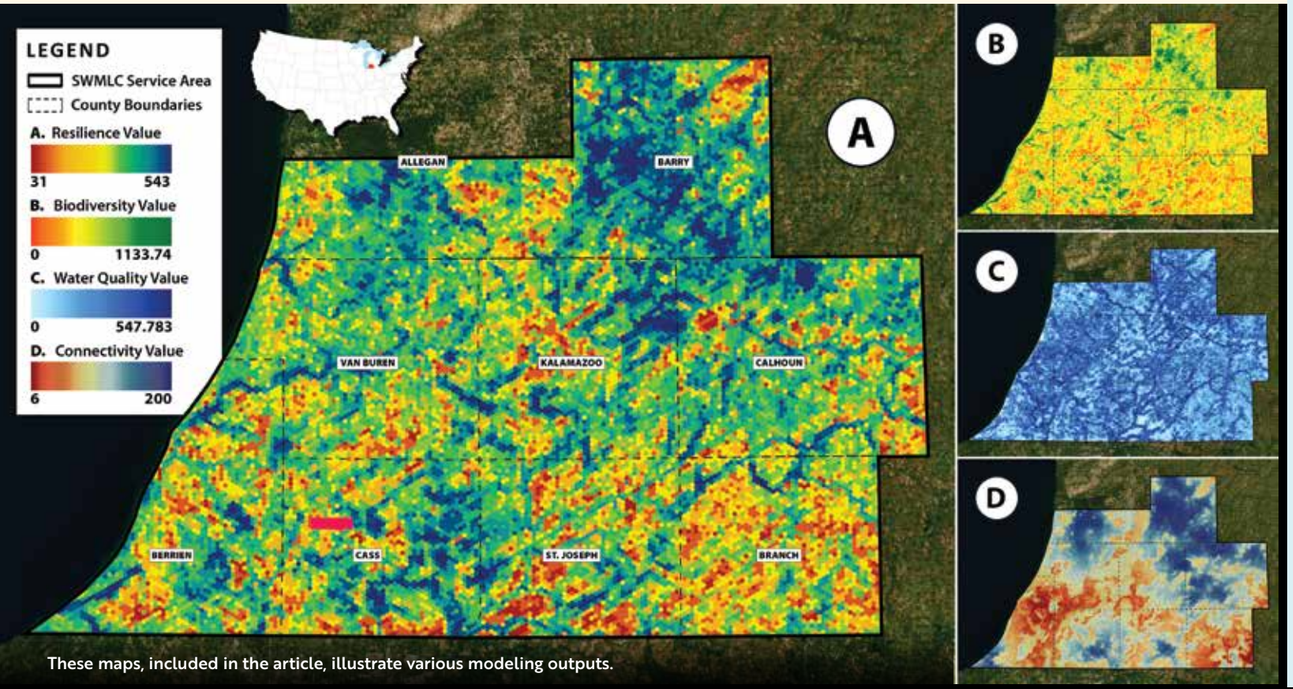
Many of us in the conservation field have roots in a combination of "ologies" that ground our work: biology, climatology, geology, hydrology, zoology, and many other disciplines. So, as certified science nerds, we're extra proud of current and former SWMLC staff who recently published a scientific paper!

Former SWMLC Land Protection Director Hilary Hunt managed the project and wrote the paper entitled "Strategic land conservation: An applied, multi-target approach to prioritization of resilient sites for protection" which was published in *Conservation Science and Practice, a Journal of the Society of Conservation Biology*. The article explains the science behind SWMLC's *2020 Strategic Land Conservation Plan*, a document that's helped guide our land protection work for the last four years. Current Conservation & Stewardship Director Mitch Lettow contributed important edits, as did Dr. Kathleen Baker of Western Michigan University, with guidance from former Land Protection Specialist Bruce Howe and former Conservation & Stewardship Director Nate Fuller.

We wish we could protect all the high-quality natural areas in our region but SWMLC doesn't have that capacity and must whittle down the choices. For years, we used staff knowledge and ground-truthing to make these decisions – not a bad method – but one that excluded areas we were less familiar with and didn't account for climate change. The *2020 Strategic Land Conservation Plan* was originally conceived by Nate, then created by Hilary, Mitch, and Bruce (working with Dr. Baker and others on mapping and philosophy) back in 2020 to provide more objective, measurable criteria for choosing areas of focus.

Mitch explains, "The plan was inspired by climate change adaptation – how do we create a resilient landscape with a network of protected lands that allow plants, animals, and their genes to move over time as conditions change? One idea is to anchor land protection work in our core conservation values: clean water and rich biodiversity, focused around large connected natural areas. Using scores that combine these values, we visualized 'a way through'a complex landscape using north-south corridors that species could use in response to climate change."

The paper has been published as 'open-access' so that anyone can read it for free, with the authors' hope that other land trusts can adopt the methodology and tailor it to their own work. You can read the paper here: https://bit.ly/3ySfC2Y



These maps, included in the article, illustrate various modeling outputs.

In Memoriam, Alfred Gemrich

Emily Wilke, former SWMLC Conservation Projects Director

Alfred Gemrich, longtime supporter, former SWMLC board member, conservation easement owner, Blue Green Wayfinder, friend and advocate for SWMLC, recently passed away at the age of 88.

I first met Al and and his wife Jean in 2006 when they generously donated a conservation easement on their beautiful 200 acres in Barry County. Soon after, Al began to help with many of SWMLC's land protection projects, donating thousands of hours of time and legal expertise, only charging to pay his legal assistant Penny. I liked to tell landowners, "I have an attorney in my back pocket" – but Al was more than that: he was a brilliant legal mind, a Yale Law graduate who practiced for 60 years, and had been selected as a Michigan "Super Lawyer," a distinction reached through peer recognition and professional achievement that places attorneys in the top 5%.

For the next 15 years, Al and I worked hand in hand to conserve over 7,000 acres. His availability and willingness to help was amazing: if I got stuck or had a question, he would call me back that same day, not just giving an answer but helping me think through the problem from different angles like an attorney. As a young woman fresh out of grad school, his belief in my potential was empowering. He encouraged me to take the lead during important legal meetings – and I knew I could because I had him sitting next to me.

SWMLC is so fortunate to have had him on our team and while it's impossible to capture every game-changing achievement he contributed to, here are a few standouts . . .

Impressed by SWMLC's work, Al nominated the organization for the Land Trust Alliance Excellence Award in 2010. This prestigious honor is awarded annually to a single land trust for its "incredible and innovative land conservation successes." Al promoted our achievements and secured support from partnering land trusts and the Alliance, leading to SWMLC winning the award among 950 land trusts nationwide.

Al also played a vital role in helping SWMLC protect Warren Woods Natural Area and a large portion of Warren Dunes State Park. In 2009, the fate of these beloved properties was uncertain when a 99-year lease agreement came to an end. The Warren Family agreed to transfer the properties to the State of Michigan but wanted a third party to oversee things and make sure certain conditions in the original lease were still met. When SWMLC board member George Burgoyne brought the matter to our attention, Al, who was a board member at the time, devoted countless hours of legal help to show that SWMLC was fully capable of taking on this oversight role. The Berrien County Circuit Court and Warren Family agreed and named SWMLC as Special Trustee, making it the only Michigan land trust with this special status. Thanks to Al's hard work, these two beautiful natural areas will continue to be managed by the DNR and remain open for everyone to enjoy, protected forever.

I'm incredibly blessed to have known Al as a friend and asked for his perspective on death. Al had accomplished so much . . . achieving public recognition and honor, earning a good living, and traveling the world (even making it to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro) – but his answer was simply, "All that really matters in the end is if you were a good person." And that he was, one of the best.

Tonight I need a dance. I will commune with my Maker and dance before the Lord and His creation. I will take my loneliness to a secret, strange, and starlit place far from the eye of those who think it odd, who have forgotten how to dance, who fear, or never felt so pure and primitive a need. There to dance my dance, seen only by an understanding moon in magic firelight and the clean crystal air of night. Harkening to wordless music. Listening for the ageless rhythms rising from the heart and winds. My feet will sound the urgent messages to the quiet, knowing trees, asking them to let me join them in their easy knowledge that I have lost . . . I will dance until all sense of sadness and separation are erased. I will return refreshed.

Excerpt from Al's piece, "Turning Mourning into Dancing," published in *Christian Science Sentinel,* Vol. 102, Issue 40, 2000.

Donations • June 16 – October 16, 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's birthday

Susan and Paul Damon
In honor of Olga Stieve's 90th birthday

Bobbie Hineline
In honor of Spike Kunetz

Pam Hjelmquist
In honor of father, Ken Kirton, for his 90th birthday and father's day

Paula Jamison
In honor of Betty Lee Ongley

Nanette and Jack Keiser
In honor of Kathryn Keene/ Robert Keiser Marriage

Robert and Joyce Leppard
In honor of "The Trekkers"

Sandra and Fred Linabury
In honor of mother, Liz Clem, for her 90th Birthday

Sandy Rose
In Honor of Kay and Bob O'Boyle

Stephen Siegel and Robin Drayer
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Ms. Amy Simler
In Honor of Eleanor Roberts

Memorials

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In memory of Tom Stieve

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In memory of Phil Perry

Leslie K. Ritter-Jenkins
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Patricia Sulier
In memory of Gary Stock

Philip Willson
In memory of Ron Foster

In Memory of Mike Champagne

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Nancy Kolas

Bob and Lisa Krupiarz

Kent and Lauri Lindquist

Kip and Suzanne Miller
Remembering his love of nature

Rich Novak

Roberta Ann Remias

Todd and Tami Romkema

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Karen Sundwick

Randy and Tricia Thompson

Nancy and Douglas Toppin

Bill and Debbie Underhill

Patrick and Diane Underwood

Stephanie Walden-Schwake

Joanne Wood
Remembering his inspirational teaching and leadership at Seven Ponds Nature Center

In-Kind Donations

Anonymous
Woodworking projects at the SWMLC office and donations of first aid supplies

Keto Gyekis
Drone photography

Heritage Chevrolet
Loan of a vehicle

Landscape Forms
Hosting our annual meeting, gifts of outdoor furniture, and their work in planning for our outdoor office space

OCBA Landscape Architects
Running a mini "charette" at SWMLC office for the outdoor office and grounds renovation collaboration with Landscape Forms

Warner Norcross + Judd
Hosting our Resource Development Committee meetings

Grants

The Burdick-Thorne Foundation

The H.P. and Genevieve Connable Fund

Land Trust Alliance

Nancy Malcomson Connable Fund

Matching Gifts

Pfizer Foundation Matching Gifts Program

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WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS!

A complete list of new and renewing members from 2024 will be printed in the Summer 2025 issue of *Protecting Nature.*

Cerulean Warbler ($250+)

Daniel Hawkins

Spotted Turtle ($100+)

Kathryn Campbell

Richard L. Freiman

Judah Gesmund

Arthur Smith

Little Brown Bat ($50+)

Natsumi Asanuma

Belinda Diane Bankston

Priscilla Bollinger and Tony Hernandez

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Paypal Giving Fund

Chiang Ploughman Family Fund

Charles Schadel

Birdathon

Beth Troxell

Corrections . . . we're very sorry!

These donors were not acknowledged in the last issue of our newsletter. Please accept our apologies for the error.

Mary and Dennis Frailing
LaGrange Valley Wetlands Campaign

Bruce and Mary Klosner
Membership (LIttle Brown Bat)

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.

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.

Holiday gift-giving that also protects nature!

Help raise awareness with SWMLC-themed gifts

T-SHIRTS • our 2024 design features an attractive box turtle printed on a soft cotton-blend shirt that comes in seven earthy colors in sizes small to double-extra-large.

BEANIES • Keep your head cozy with a knit cap featuring an embroidered SWMLC fern leaf logo. One size fits all in orange,navy, and gray.

BASEBALL CAPS • A wardrobe essential! Good quality, sturdy, size-adjustable, 100% cotton and (best of all!) it features our embroidered logo in front. Available in five colors.

TOTES • Beautiful eco-friendly tote bags that fold into a compact shape make awesome stocking stuffers!

MAGNETS • A great way to spread the word - and what a thrill when you see one on another vehicle in traffic!

GIFT MEMBERSHIPS • Recognize and honor someone's love for nature with a SWMLC gift membership.

TO ORDER • **shop the secure SWMLC webstore by using this QR code**

OR entering https://.app.etapestry.com/cart/SouthwestMichiganLandConser/default/index.php

OR following the SWMLC Gear prompts under the "Give" tab in our website's menu.

Please place your order soon! We will do our very best to get items to you in time for the holidays!

PORTMAN'S LEGACY WHITE WINE FROM CODY KRESTA VINEYARD & WINERY

Made exclusively for SWMLC by the great folks at Cody Kresta, a bottle of Portman's Legacy is a classy, tasty gift that also supports habitat restoration at Portman Nature Preserve! Visit Cody Kresta's website for details: www.codykrestawinery.com

Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD's) and Gifts from Donor Advised Funds (DAF's)

Are you 70 ½ years old?

If so, you may need to take a Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) from your retirement account in the form of a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). You can donate up to $100,000 per year to one or more charities through a QCD, and those distributions will be excluded from your taxable income. **SWMLC is eternally grateful to receive QCD's in any amount, and they are becoming a more and more important part of supporting our conservation work!**

Donor Advised Funds (DAF's) are another great way to make an impact! DAF's have significant tax benefits and, as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, donations to SWMLC are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. **If you have or are planning on directing a gift to SWMLC from your DAF, please let us know so that we can thank you!**

Aaron Kortenhoven

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What's with all the QR codes? We can just 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.

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