

**Mississippi Valley
CONSERVANCY**

Preserving Priceless Landscapes

Annual Report 2015

Puzzle pieces fit together

Sara Bentley noted, "It is clear there's a lot of pressure in the area for residential development. And it's only going to increase with a growing population."

When neighbor, Leonard Kick passed away his family asked that memorials be sent to Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Sara Bentley and Joel Lazinger had owned their land since 1977. They had talked with Leonard about their shared conservation beliefs, but it was not until their neighbor died that they discovered his land, adjoining theirs, was protected by a conservation easement.

Following Leonard's lead, Sara and Joel protected their land near Middle Ridge in La Crosse County with a conservation easement last fall.

Sara and Joel's land is a woodland home for migratory songbirds including the cerulean warbler and scarlet tanager. The veery and wood thrush, two songbirds that have been struggling, couldn't be more happy to know their summer home will still be there each year as they return from migration to nest in the trees that cover the hillside.

"The land brings me a lot of joy!" Sara remarked. "Once we both retired, we thought we'd travel more but that's become less important to us than witnessing the changes at home." Joel added, "Our dream has always been to see our land preserved in its pristine state forever. It was a beautiful site when I first saw it in the late '70's and it's a beautiful site today.

A lot has changed over the years, and it's been exciting to see it grow and change. Nature is not static." He added, "One of my favorite spots is one I visited that first time I walked the land, out on the point where the shooting stars grow. We have a place near the shed with sugar maple and, late in the afternoon, the light through the yellow leaves makes it feel like standing in a cathedral."

In the process of getting to know the land where they have lived for over three decades, Sara and Joel have enlisted the expertise of foresters, birders and biologists, including MVC's Abbie Church, to deepen their knowledge of their place on the land. "We had no idea that there was so much diversity" surrounding their home, says Joel.

Sara says that at first she was reluctant to live far from town, but "now I love being out here" and that the diversity and connectedness of it all is something she never gets tired of. "We learned so much about this place" in personalizing their easement, said Sara, "we know it is one of the best things we've ever done." Both say they were brought up on conservation values, including the determination to "leave this tiny spot on earth better than we found it."

On a mission now to recruit more neighbors to join with them and expand the protected landscape, they say "wouldn't it be great to protect the whole area" from Middle Ridge to the Experimental Forest, a distance of five miles.

"We have a place near the shed with sugar maple and, late in the afternoon, the light through the yellow leaves makes it feel like standing in a cathedral." -Joel Lazinger



You don't own a piece of land —the land owns you

“You don't own a piece of land. The land owns you and you have a responsibility to take care of it. A conservation easement is a part of that responsibility.”

-Seamus Leahy

Seamus and Lisa love the driftless area for its beauty: the wonderful ridge-top views, the mysterious valleys, the woods filled with oak, pine and birch, the wildflowers.

But coming from Northern Wisconsin, they were surprised and saddened at how this area in Southwest Wisconsin had been chopped up and sold off in small pieces.

The first time Lisa drove up the road, winding around the hill and through the woods, she fell in love with the land. The plant life is bountiful and diverse. The May trilliums astound her each time she walks to the mailbox. The Harebells and the Maidenhair fern remind her of little red bishop's crooks as they begin to open.

Lisa reflects, “Everything the weather does is gorgeous. The first fall we lived on the land it was really rainy. The mist would rise up out of the valleys and swirl around in the breeze. It reminds us of Ireland.”

The first thing they did was set up pastures for their horses. It makes Lisa feel good to know the horses can graze naturally on a slope, which means they are getting additional exercise while they graze. Watson, the oldest horse, moved to the land with Lisa and Seamus. “Watson has always been alert and sensitive to noise,” Lisa observed, but “since moving to their new home, Watson and all of the horses are calm and quiet. It is as close as we can get to giving them natural surroundings to live on.”

Seamus especially loves the coulees. The sun rarely reaches the bottom of them. Protected by old-growth canopies, the ground is mostly covered with moss—dark, wet, and damp, just like it has been for centuries. They are primeval looking. When he first saw them Seamus said, “Wow this has got to be taken care of. That doesn't mean you do something to it; it means you leave it alone.”

For Lisa there is a special place on the ridge that gives her a feeling of peace – at the very top, along the fence line: “You can see the whole top of the property and all of the other ridge-tops in the distance.”



Thinking about the future, Seamus worries about their land suffering the same fate as so much of Southwest Wisconsin, being chopped up into parcels and developed. But they are working with their neighbors, who also have conservation easements, to do something about it. “If you have the means, you should put some of it back together and protect it with a conservation easement. You should not feel like your land is too small to make a difference, because as more neighbors join in we end up protecting the land together.”

Seamus and Lisa both want to stay on their land as long as they can. “I would like to be here until I am 92,” said Lisa. But what pleases them most is knowing the land will stay as it is even longer than that.

“The mist would rise up out of the valleys and swirl around in the breeze. It reminds us of Ireland.”





A beautiful place to simply be

“I wanted to protect those things that make a kid’s heart beat faster, like catching frogs and turtles.” Tom said, with a smile as he looked up from a desktop strewn with photos and maps of his property on the West Fork of the Kickapoo River. Tom Lukens has long had an interest in both habitat protection and in sharing nature with others.

Tom summed up a need in his business charter for Nature Nooks Retreat, ‘to protect and enhance biodiversity and carrying capacity, and to create a means of sharing both an appreciation for and a profound sense of belonging to Nature.’

He was describing his efforts to create habitat for the varied population of wildlife on his 87-acre property. Tom was the first landowner in the state of Wisconsin to put in nongame habitat

practices that benefit bees, butterflies, songbirds, eagles, frogs, snakes, and turtles. Tom’s restoration work includes turtle basking logs, which he installed in 2004. The day after installation, Tom remarked, “A snapping turtle came right up to where I was sitting, put his claws on the rock and looked right at me. I think he was saying ‘thank you.’”

Tom is 64 with a neat gray goatee, and he talks as he stalks the polished concrete floor of his solar-heated home. He’s gathering materials for a meeting later in the morning, but he has time to take a fast-paced tour of the land. A mile of the West Fork Kickapoo River meanders through the valley as the sun begins to set. We pass serviceberry and other wildlife-friendly plantings, a young bur oak, an orchard of fruit and nut trees, restored prairie, a small pond with a skin of ice where,



“A snapping turtle came right up to where I was sitting, put his claws on the rock and looked right at me. I think he was saying ‘thank you’.”



he said, with a wave of his hand, four species of turtle spend the winter. We pass a strip of dried prairie grasses and other perennials along the bank of the West Fork.

Tom's land holds so much biodiversity that it is tops among the properties in southwest Wisconsin protected by a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

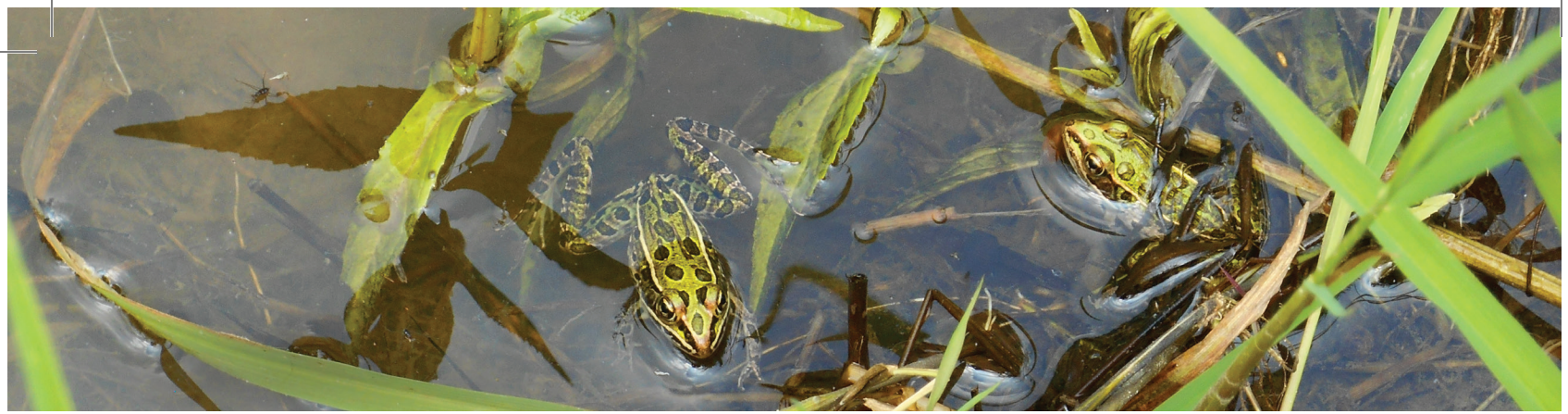
Tom wanted to give permanent protection to his land and the 14 threatened and endangered species, along with 270 other species that call the land home. The easement is the first in the outreach to landowners project funded in part by the McKnight Foundation for Mississippi Valley Conservancy and partners to permanently protect land to keep sediment and other pollutants out of the streams in the Kickapoo watershed.

Tom said he likes to lead by example. “Then I can proselytize.”

He said Mississippi Valley Conservancy member and friend, Maggie Jones first mentioned easements to him eight or nine years ago. “But I wasn't ready then.”

Tom's easement recognizes his business, Nature Nooks Retreat, which includes two cabins and a conference room where guests can learn about the animals, prairies, wetlands, river and ponds. He maintains interpretive trails throughout the land. Tom believes the best way to protect those things that make a kid's heart beat faster is through education and permanent protection from development.

Cover photograph courtesy of Tom Lukens.



What a dump!

Looking at it now, you'd never believe the diverse and vibrant 20-acre wetland adjacent to Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area (SNA) was, just eight years ago, a tiled, degraded farm field littered with debris, ranging from tires to televisions to appliances.

A dirty job everyone wanted

Around that time, Mississippi Valley Conservancy was looking for funds to purchase the land, the La Crosse Airport and the Department of Transportation Bureau of Aeronautics (BOA) were looking for a degraded wetland they could restore as a mitigation project to fill wetlands for the airport's runway.

The BOA supervised a five-year wetland mitigation project, hauled off the garbage, and removed 50,000 yards of sediment and invasive plant material. These efforts uncovered dormant seeds of native plants as the site returned to its early landscape from 150 to 200 years ago. Native grasses and wildflowers were planted relying on guidance from John Curtis' book, *Vegetation of Wisconsin*.

Restoring the art of exploration and imagination

Heidi Svee works for Big Brothers Big Sisters, and her three children, ages 15, 9 and 5 love to camp, visit parks, and play in the yard but, it's not always that easy to get them to go outside and just play.

When I was young we would get home from school and immediately head outside no matter what the weather conditions were and we wouldn't come in until it was time for dinner. Now I see children with so much screen time and no interaction with each other or the outdoors. Our kids seem to have lost the art of exploration, interaction and imagination.

As a busy mom, Heidi said it's hard to come up with things to do to get my kids outdoors and moving. Having Mississippi Valley Conservancy's guided hikes like the Stargazing hike at the Villa makes it easy – all we have to do is know the time and location and simply show up.

My daughter, Alexis who is 15, went on the hike with her Big Sister Kim. It was a challenge for her, but Kim, who is really fit did a great job encouraging her and I loved how she did the long hike and made it all the way back to the top. For my youngest, Roman, it was great to have a place where he was free to wander and explore. It was his first time to see a huge telescope and view the moon through it, and he really loved going out to the point on the cliff. Roman exclaimed, "it was so cool how high up we were!"

We had no idea that we lived in such a cool spot and we had no idea what Driftless meant. Now when I hear someone ask about Driftless I say "I know what that means." Alexis shared, "being outside in nature is so much healthier and better for us than sitting on a couch gaming."

Flora, fauna and frogs

Today the restored wetland supports 140 native plants, 41 bird species, at least 24 insect species and three mammal species. Whitetail deer browse and bed down in the tall grasses. An otter has been seen and muskrats recently moved in. It has been estimated the site is breeding about 300,000 amphibians annually.

Diverse groups achieved a shared goal

This wetland mitigation project is an exceptional example of successful cooperation between a landowner and several organizations coming together to accomplish a challenging land restoration goal. The land was transferred to MVC bringing Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area to a total of 440 acres. Most of all your support helped make this success story possible!

“Alexis gave Kim a big hug and Kim said it was her first hug ever from her little sister!”



Big Brothers Big Sisters is excited to be a part of Mississippi Valley Conservancy's guided hikes. It's a great way to introduce our youth, some who have never been to many of these cool places, to these natural wonders of our bluffslands.

Promises of Mother Nature and the future

The seed catalogs are piled high on my desk. Tabbed with multicolor sticky notes indicating both new and old varieties I want to try. Every winter, this pile represents the promises of Mother Nature and the future.

After all, if you are going to garden you have to believe in the power of Mother Nature and the future. You work the soil, plant the seed, sprinkle the water, and... wait.

You just know that the future bounties of the garden depend on hard work, luck, and the cooperation of Mother Nature.

My optimism for the future of our forests, prairies, wetlands, streams and farms, spills over every day at Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

As I reflect on the amazing work that has been accomplished by land owners, donors, volunteers and staff this past year, I can't help but look forward to the next twelve months. I know that with your help we can turn over the dirt, plant the seeds, remove the weeds, and sprinkle the water of land conservation for our children's future. Our hard work and plans represent our promise to Mother Nature and the future.

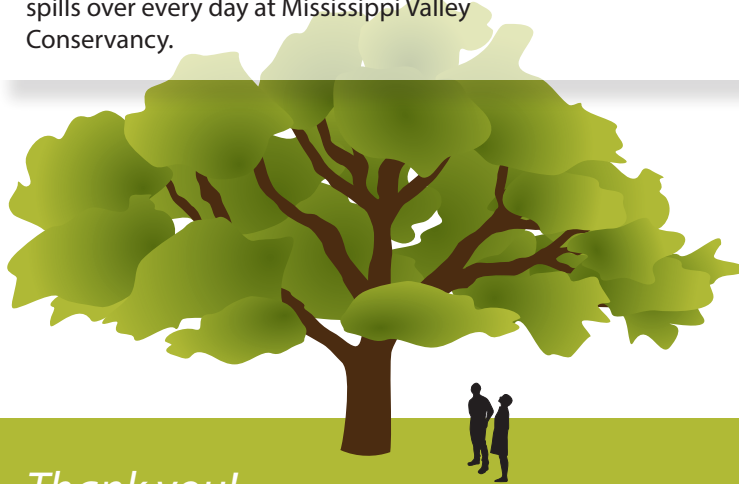
It is a privilege to be a part of a team that works so hard for generations of people they will never meet. Thank you for your support in 2015 and I look forward to your help in growing our work of land protection in 2016!



Best regards,

Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director

"I close my eyes and breathe deeply. The smell of freshly dug soil... I can't imagine my life without being able to get my hands dirty, dig in the dirt, and make things grow."



17,369 acres protected forever

Thank you!

Your wonderful support makes everything we do possible. Let's celebrate the success of 2015.

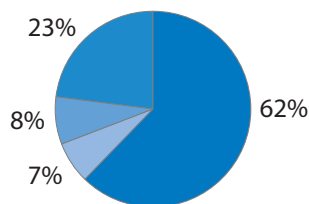
1,299 acres of forest, prairie, wetlands, rivers and farms were protected for birds, bees, butterflies, frogs, fish and fresh, local food.

2,314 school children learned about trees, flowers and plants that invade as well as the animals that live on the bluffs and in the valleys.

2014–2015 Income

■ Contributions	\$ 402,188
■ Released from Restrictions	\$ 148,799
■ Special Events	\$ 51,720
■ Grants & Endowments	\$ 43,322
□ Investment Income	\$ 3,227

Total Income \$649,256

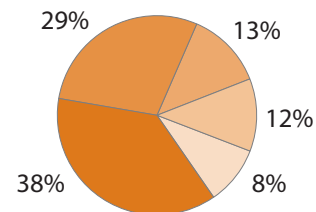


2014–2015 Expenses

■ Land Protection	\$ 190,785
■ Land Management	\$ 146,113
■ Outreach & Education	\$ 64,288
■ Management & General	\$ 58,484
■ Membership & Fundraising	\$ 42,482

Total Expenses \$502,152

Land Purchases \$527,072



Thanks to **YOU** amazing things are happening.

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\$10,000 & Above

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Every year, with your support, there are more trails for kids to roam, more farms for food to grow, more streams run with cool, clear water, more forests and prairies quietly host the birds, bees and wildlife of this unique and special place we call home.

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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, non-profit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. MVC has permanently conserved 17,369 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, and streams in and around the Mississippi, Kickapoo and Wisconsin Rivers since our founding in 1997. Over 4,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.



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Drawn by the water

Nearly twenty years ago, the scenic, winding Bad Axe River, wooded bluffs, rugged landscape, and diverse habitat drew the attention of Phil and Kathy Aaker. “We spent two years looking at properties,” said Phil, a pilot, “in flying over, we were drawn by the water and encouraged by the Bad Axe Valley.”

Phil and Kathy both declare the river to be their favorite place on the land. “There is a pretty place up stream, with riffles and rocks,” said Kathy, “in the winter it ices up, and is neat to walk along.” The bridge over the river is Phil’s favorite, “where our grandchildren like to swim. It rarely freezes over completely; the spring water keeps it too warm. In a state park, you might see the land in one or two seasons, but when you live there, you see it every day, and every day it is beautiful in a different way.”

Through a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Phil and Kathy permanently protected their beautiful 80-acre property along the South Fork Bad Axe River. “We have protected what we started,” said Phil, “and it is something our grandkids can experience for years to come,” added Kathy.

Grandson Nathan cools off in the river.

