



Mississippi Valley Conservancy

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**NEW “WILTON HEMLOCKS” NATURE PRESERVE  
PROTECTS RARE HABITAT ON KICKAPOO  
Mississippi Valley Conservancy’s First Monroe County Public Land Preserve  
Opens to Public for Research, Education, and Recreation**

MONROE COUNTY, WI – October 19, 2017 – When Eric and Inese Epstein acquired land on the Kickapoo River in Monroe County, fifteen years ago, they knew they were protecting something rare. Now, with a major grant from the Paul E. Stry Foundation, Mississippi Valley Conservancy has accepted the Epstein’s donation of 89.14 acres of ecologically important property on the Kickapoo River. The Conservancy will protect the land in perpetuity as “Wilton Hemlocks,” a nature preserve that is open to the public for research, education, hiking, fishing, and paddling. It is the first Mississippi Valley Conservancy public nature preserve in Monroe County, and it brings the total number of Conservancy protected nature preserves in the nine counties served to 21.

The land, covered mostly with woods and sedge meadow, is located on both sides of the Kickapoo near the town of Wilton in Monroe County. The land is especially significant for a [hemlock relict](#) – a moist patch of hemlock forest that is considered an ecological gem unique to this area and extremely rare worldwide. Hemlock trees, some of them 150 to 200 years old, stand above the river, which is flanked by conifer-clad sandstone cliffs, springs and seeps.

In addition to the hemlock relict, the property has alder thickets, springs and marsh, and includes a half-mile frontage on both sides of the river. The property is located within the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Kickapoo River Conservation Opportunity Area of Continental Ecological Significance and has populations of declining species including cerulean warblers, Acadian flycatchers, and eleven other state-protected rare species, including several bat species.

“The generosity of the Epsteins and the Stry Foundation ensure that the site will be open to the public for hiking, bird watching, nature photography, fishing, and canoeing,” said

Carol Abrahamzon, executive director of the Conservancy. “We will also use the land for environmental education programs and make it available for researchers and graduate students to study the rare species, some of them state-listed, using the property.”

Abrahamzon said that a \$37,024 grant from Stry helped with the expenses in completing the transaction and will help cover the costs of maintaining the property. She said the Conservancy knew the unique value of the property since Eric had a long career with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as an ecologist. He retired in 2011. Epstein said he had the opportunity "to poke my nose into every cool corner of the state." For example, he led a project in the late 1990s to evaluate the coastal wetlands of Lake Superior as part of the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory Program. Of “Wilton Hemlocks,” Eric says the property "shows many of the attributes of undisturbed old-growth forest, making it useful to land management researchers.”

Eric Epstein said in a recent interview that he and his wife purchased the land some 15 years ago from her brother who was planning to sell it – a sale that would have resulted in extensive logging of the property. "It was an emergency situation," he said. Inese said that her brother who needed to sell quickly told them, "Buy today or the loggers will get it." The Epsteins said they intended to hold the land, hoping that the state would buy and protect it. Eric said it became apparent to them that state protection was unlikely, so they turned to Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

Bob Micheel, director of the Monroe County Land Conservation Department, says the department’s goal is to move more land from short-term to long-term conservation plans, and that the Epsteins are doing just that. “This act of conservation benefits all Monroe County citizens and the legacy of Monroe County which is our impact on water quality here at the headwaters of many watersheds. It’s great news,” said Micheel.

What might visitors to the site experience? The Epsteins offered this: A very sensual experience – how light filters through the branches, the smells of humus and duff, and the knowledge that there’s a barred owl watching you though you may never see it.

Carol Abrahamzon said, “Through their generous donation and the Stry Foundation grant, the Epsteins have provided an enduring legacy to future generations while achieving peace of mind, knowing that their land will be taken care of far into the future.”

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#### ABOUT MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY

Founded in 1997, Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a nationally accredited regional land trust that has permanently protected nearly 20,000 acres of scenic lands in southwestern Wisconsin by working with private landowners, businesses and local communities on voluntary conservation projects. The focus of the Conservancy is to conserve the forests, prairies, wetlands, streams and farms that enrich our communities, for the health and well-being of current and future generations.