



Mississippi Valley Conservancy

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**PROTECTION OF WILDLIFE HABITAT ON BAD AXE RIVER EXPANDS
Conservation Agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy
Connects Protected Lands**

VERNON COUNTY, WI – December 28, 2017 – Mark Heberlein’s and Kathleen Fitzgerald’s 146-acre property located near Viroqua consists of scenic wooded bluffland and native grasslands along a ¾-mile long stretch of the South Fork Bad Axe River. With a conservation agreement signed today with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, their extensive conservation efforts will now be protected in perpetuity for the health and well being of current and future generations.

Depending on the season, a hike through Mark and Kathleen’s property might feature a sandhill crane grazing or a glimpse of a brilliantly colored indigo bunting and scarlet tanager. According to Mark, “Sandhill’s are out there, nesting in our valley. It is amazing to think that historically their population was decimated and has now rebounded. We’ve created an island of habitat.” “Sandhill numbers were down to an estimated 25 breeding pairs eighty years ago, and in our lifetime have rebounded up to over 5,000 pairs” added Abbie Church, Conservancy conservation director. These birds are some of the treasures to be found at a place like Mark and Kathleen’s property, which serves as a critical location for migratory species like these to breed or forage during the summer months before heading to central or South America for the winter. Black swallowtails and red admiral butterflies may be fluttering around the prairie. But birds and pollinating species like butterflies only tell part of Mark and Kathleen’s story.

Mark and Kathleen have translated their firm belief in the land into practice. The family has restored remnant prairie with prescribed burning and invasive species control, improved the woodlands with timber stand improvement and tree plantings, and enhanced the South Fork Bad Axe River with streambank stabilization projects and planting perennial native cover to filter and absorb runoff and floodwaters. The land includes multiple springs and seeps, all draining into the river, a valuable coldwater trout fishery. “Their work to restore the diversity and resiliency to the land is a testament to

their land ethic,” said Carol Abrahamzon, executive director of the Conservancy, “and we are honored to protect that work permanently.”

This land has been a labor of love over the past 17 years for Mark Heberlein, who has planted hundreds of seedling trees, including red, bur, and white oak, hawthorn, and chestnut. Former croplands have been seeded to native prairie grassland, with a sea of big bluestem, switchgrass, yellow coneflower, bee balm and others providing food and cover for area wildlife, including pollinators. As a result, their property features an incredible mix of habitat types that testify to their hard work and the real source of inspiration for pursuing their recent conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. “It was the diversity that drew me,” said Mark. “There are times I feel overwhelmed and then something happens to renew my enthusiasm. You get a good burn in and the land responds. It’s like an old spiritual, sometimes you call and the land responds and sometimes the land calls and you respond.” These habitat types help form natural communities that include wildflowers, grasses, and sedges, critical resources for declining pollinators, those bees and butterflies without which the flowers will not bloom and our food will not grow. All kinds of plant and animal diversity is increasingly difficult to come by in southwestern Wisconsin, and yet a hike through Mark and Kathleen’s property showcases both the Driftless Area’s persistent, charismatic diversity and its scenic beauty. When asked why they considered protecting their land with a conservation easement, Mark replied “I don’t want all of this effort to be for nothing. I don’t want to do all of this and have someone come in later and un-do it.”

The primary cause of declining wildlife populations is habitat loss; Mark and Kathleen’s property is situated next to another 81-acres protected by the Conservancy, and just a mile away from 600+ acres of private land protected by the Conservancy and adjacent to 185-acres of DNR land. To the north is the 487-acre Sidie Hollow Park. A contiguous corridor of protected habitat along the South Fork Bad Axe River is ideal for area wildlife needs.

Wisconsin is the third-highest ranked fishing destination in the country; the conservation agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy ensures that the scenic views and wildlife habitat of the property will remain as they are, in perpetuity.

Mark and Kathleen’s property is within the Conservancy’s Bad Axe River Priority Area. Such areas are often designated by land trusts to guide decisions about what conservation projects represent the best use of limited financial resources for the greatest potential protection of significant natural resources.

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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.