

HOMETOWN

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MVC deal connects protected lands

VIROQUA — Mark Heberlein's and Kathleen Fitzgerald's 146-acre property 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 this week with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, their extensive conservation efforts will be protected in perpetuity for the health and well-being of current and future generations.

Depending on the season, a hike through their property might feature a sandhill crane grazing or a glimpse of a brilliantly colored indigo bunting and scarlet tanager.

According to Heberlein, "Sandhills 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

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MVC executive director

of habitat."

"Sandhill numbers were down to an estimated 25 breeding pairs 80 years ago, and in our lifetime have rebounded up to over 5,000 pairs," said Abbie Church, Conservancy conservation director.

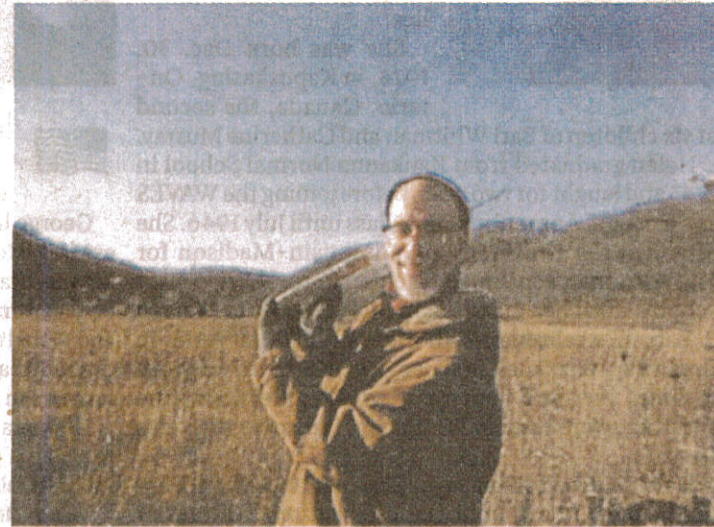
Heberlein and Fitzgerald have restored remnant prairie with prescribed burning and invasive species control, improved the

woodlands with timber stand improvement and tree plantings, and enhanced the South Fork Bad Axe River with stream bank 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 Heberlein, who has planted hundreds of seedling trees, including red, bur, and white oak, hawthorn, and chestnut. Former croplands

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mark Heberlein has planted hundreds of seedling trees, including red, bur and white oak, hawthorn and chestnut on land he and Kathleen Fitzgerald have placed in a conservation agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

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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.

Heberlein and Fitzgerald's property is situated next to another 81 acres protected by the conservancy and just a mile away from 600-plus acres of private land protected by the conservancy and adjacent to 185-acres of DNR land. To the north is 487-acre Sidie Hollow Park.

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.