

Protecting the Places We Love

Story and photographs by Doreen Pfof

From the wetland's edge, a half-dozen sandhill cranes trumpeted briefly before taking flight. Overhead, a pair of pelicans soared on stiff wings toward the river. The mosquitoes were rampant on the late-July day, but Abbie Church, conservation director for the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, seemed not to notice. With the help of conservation assistant Mary Dresser, Church was visiting a series of waypoints to check habitat conditions and update her records on a 756-acre property under the conservancy's protection.

Based in La Crosse, Wis., but operating in nine southwest Wisconsin counties, the Mississippi Valley Conservancy has, to date, preserved some 20,000 acres of the bluffs, grasslands, woodlands, wetlands, farm lands and open spaces that not only make the Driftless Area beautiful, but contribute to the integrity and health of the region's lands and waters. The conservancy is a land trust, a non-profit organization that buys or accepts donations of land or conservation easements to protect the land from development — forever.

Protection from what? That depends on the precise location of the land, said Church, but there are two common threads. Development pressure from mining companies is considerable, especially in Buffalo and Trempealeau counties.

"A lot of people tell me that if they had known their kids would sell to a mining company, they never would have passed the land on to them," she said. "Or they would have done a conservation easement."

In the La Crosse area, on the other hand, residential and commercial growth threaten to encroach on open spaces and scenic views — unless those lands are set aside for a different kind of use.



Mary Dresser, left, and Abbie Church inspect the Kube conservancy site.

The conservancy's 22 nature preserves — roughly 5,000 acres of scenic and diverse lands — are not only for wildlife, but are open to public recreation. While the conservancy owns

Easements placed on the Kubes' property in 2007 allow farming to continue on portions of the land, but ensure that areas closer to the river will remain in their natural state.

most of these properties, it has also worked with partners to acquire parcels for eventual transfer to a larger project. In the La Crosse Bluffland Protection Program, for example, the conservancy served as acquisition partner for lands transferred to the city of La Crosse.

In many ways, the nature preserves

are the public face of the conservancy. However, about three times as much land is conserved in a different way: through conservation easements on privately owned lands. A conservation easement is a legal agreement through which a landowner retains most ownership rights, but relinquishes development rights — such as the right to mine or subdivide the land — to a land trust. Thus, the owner can continue to live on and enjoy the land, keep farmland in production, and eventually sell or bequeath the property, knowing that it will be safe from future development.

That was the case with the Kube property that Church inspected in July. "Al and his late wife had spent a lifetime taking care of the land and implementing conservation practices," Church explained as she and Dresser walked the edge of a recently harvested wheat field where a skid steer was loading bales onto a trailer and monarch butterflies twirled on the breeze. "They wanted to ensure that after they're gone, the next owner can't come in and undo everything they've done."

Easements placed on the Kubes' property in 2007 allow farming to continue on portions of the land, but ensure that areas closer to the river — a sedge meadow, wetlands and Mississippi flood-plain forest — will remain in their natural state. By agreeing to hold the easements, the conservancy assumes the obligation to monitor the land regularly and protect it against any uses that deviate from the agreement.

The next waypoint after the farm field was a wetland with a profusion of blossoming water lilies. Dresser checked her compass and snapped a photo. A red-winged black-bird's creaky song accompanied the twang of a green frog's calls as Church described some of a conservation director's duties. She evaluates new sites and advises the conservancy's land committee about which ones are the best candidates for conservation. For approved sites, she develops long-term plans tailored to the landowner's wishes and to the land itself.

"My all-time favorite part of my role is making initial site visits," she said. "Owners often have a favorite spot they want to share, and I love hearing about the history of the land, especially if the landowner grew up there." In return, she shares with them her observations about the species she sees and the quality of the habitat.

On the whole, she reflected, "helping landowners achieve their wishes to protect their land is really satisfying."

That's also true when the owner's wish is to turn the land over to the conservancy for a nature preserve, as Eric and Inese Epstein did in 2017 with 89 acres they owned near the Kickapoo River's headwaters. As Church noted, "The land on the far side of the river has barely been touched."

That's where a rare stand of 150- to 200-foot-tall hemlocks tower above sandstone cliffs trickling with spring water. Recognizing it as a treasure, the Epsteins hoped to donate it to



Abbie Church checks out a conservancy wetland.

the state. When that proved unfeasible, they turned to the conservancy. Now they hope to see the land used for research, education and quiet enjoyment.

"It's such an unusual and high-quality site," noted Church.

Walking along the property boundary, Church mused about how she arrived at her career. A native of central Iowa, she grew up with a love of the outdoors.

"When I was little, my dad would take me hunting and fishing. And each summer I stayed for a week with my grandma, who lived on the Raccoon River in southwest Iowa. I spent the whole time exploring," she smiled. "Essentially, that's what I do now, too."

She discovered and fell in love with the Driftless Area when a college internship with The Nature Conservancy took her to McGregor, Iowa, and Lansing, Iowa. Her appreciation for the land grew to encompass the region's people as well, especially when she joined the Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 2007 and began to work with private landowners. After five years as a conservation specialist, she became conservation director in 2012.

"This area has a lot of good people — solid, salt of the earth," she said as the visit to the Kube property drew to a close. "They're the kind of folks

you wish would move in and be your neighbor."

She may not be neighbor to every landowner, but being a trusted advisor with intimate knowledge of their land might be the next best thing. 🌿

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You Can Get Involved

- **Explore on your own:** Find descriptions, maps and directions for each of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy's nature preserves on their website: www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org.
- **Attend an organized hike or nature program:** The conservancy regularly hosts guided hikes and snowshoe outings at its nature preserves, as well as educational programs, all listed on the website.
- **Pitch in:** Become a member or, if you want to roll up your sleeves and help with land management, sign up for emails that will notify you of upcoming volunteer work parties.
- **Consider conserving:** To discuss protecting land that you own, contact the Mississippi Valley Conservancy at 608-784-3606.