



## Conservancy Notes

FALL 2024

### The magic of Tainter Creek forever protected

There are places in the Driftless Area where life seemingly moves a little slower: days seem longer, the sounds of nature seem louder, the stars seem brighter, and sleep seems deeper. Along the banks of Tainter Creek, in Vernon County, one of these places exists, and thanks to your support and the conservation leadership of three couples, it is now conserved forever.

Tom Seals and Ruth Wene, Gear and Linda Kimmel, and John Jones and Joan Volkmann signed 85 acres of scenic, wild land into a conservation easement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy on May 24, 2024. The conservation easement forever protects the property's beautiful wooded bluffs, stunning floodplain, which is seasonally adorned with dazzling spring ephemeral wildflowers, and over 1,500 feet along both banks of Tainter Creek, a renowned class I trout stream.

It all started in 1994, when Tom Seals was asked if he would like to own land in Wisconsin. To Tom, the answer



was easy: "I thought about owning land in Wisconsin every time I drove through there." Tom and Ruth, along with Gear and Linda and two other couples, looked at several properties before coming across a beautiful parcel of land nestled away in the bluffs of southern Vernon County. According to Tom, "This is one of those places that became more and more appealing the more we got to know it; it kind of has its own magic."

Part of the property's magic stems from its open floodplain and steep ravines, which host an enchanting display of spring ephemeral wildflowers, *(continued on p. 3)*

*Above: The six owners stand in Tainter Creek, which runs through the land they have conserved. From left to right are: Gear Kimmel, Linda Kimmel, Joan Volkmann, John Jones, Ruth Wene, and Tom Seals. Inset: Showy orchis in bloom.*

**A message from Carol**

## *Keeping the wagon rolling – together!*

Dusk is falling as we clear the food from the tables and gather young and old to board the hay wagon. Charlie, the brother who bought the Abrahamzon family farm years ago, comes putt-putt-putting out of the shed pulling the wagon. I breathe in the sweet scent of the fresh hay bales that line the wagon like benches and smile seeing the glowing lights strung around the wagon frame.

It's no small feat to load this crew, but working together we get it done. Some lay blankets, while others pull those who need help up onto the wagon. We're all loaded up, and faces are glowing with excitement and the reflection of the colorful lights as we head down the road.

Soon we all feel the bumpity-bump-bump of a flat tire on the wagon. There are groans of disappointment as we head back toward the barnyard. But no need to worry – a couple of the brothers, used to life on the farm, jump off the wagon to inspect the situation. The air compressor is hauled out, the tire is pumped up, and off we go again!

As we ride through the cool, refreshing breeze of the evening, the lights sway, the family chats, and everyone enjoys this special time together on the family farm.

As I sit with my husband Bill's family, I think about how we do better together – just as when together we were able to pump up that tire and get back on the road. Together, *you* make it possible to protect forests of towering trees that cool the air and support hundreds of insects, birds and other wildlife. *You* help to plant the next prairie waving in the breeze – a sea of colorful flowers and grasses providing food for bees and butterflies. *You* provide protection for the crystal-clear stream that teems with trout, frogs, and turtles.

And *you* support protecting family farms where fresh foods are grown, where the sweet scent of freshly baled hay wafts through the air, and where generations of memories are made together.

Thank you for being a part of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy Team and making the Driftless Area better for all.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon  
Executive Director



Photo of hepatica blossoms by Barry Peterson

*The magic of Tainter Creek . . . continued from cover*

features protected by the conservation easement. In April of 2012, Tom and Ruth invited their long-time friends John Jones and Joan Volkmann to view the display of Virginia bluebells on a particularly stunning occasion. Joan and John were spellbound, and they joined as owners of the property soon after.

**Forever impressions**

All six of the owners recounted years of memories of the land. Tom's favorite part was watching the power of Tainter Creek. In recent years, heavy rains have periodically turned the tranquil creek into a raging river. Floods have happened frequently on the property, and at least three 500-year floods have occurred during the time they've owned it.

Due to the flooding, Tainter Creek itself has changed noticeably. While no longer a part of the main channel, several oxbows retain water and provide vital habitat for native wildlife, including frogs, turtles, beavers, and waterfowl. The conservation easement restricts future development to protect the habitat and natural resources in perpetuity so wildlife species will continue to have a place to thrive.

Gear and Linda are both avid cyclists, and they often spend their days cycling through the blufflands. But to Linda, the best feature of the property appears when the day is over, the sun dips below the horizon, the stars shine brightly, and the sounds of frogs and insects echo through the valley

According to Ruth, the property always seems to offer some magic: fireflies glow a bluish green across the landscape, filling the valley with a seemingly celestial light, and frogs sing through the night, further contributing to the enchanting display. An avid birder, she has identified more than 80 avian species on the property, including several rare ones such as the American bittern, cerulean warbler, eastern meadowlark, red-headed woodpecker, and ruby-crowned kinglet.

The bald eagle, once seldom seen in the area, now calls the property home as well. John still remembers seeing a particularly grandiose eagle, as it perched on a sturdy limb reaching high out over the valley. At that moment, John felt a deeper connection with nature; a sense that no matter what happens, everything will be all right.

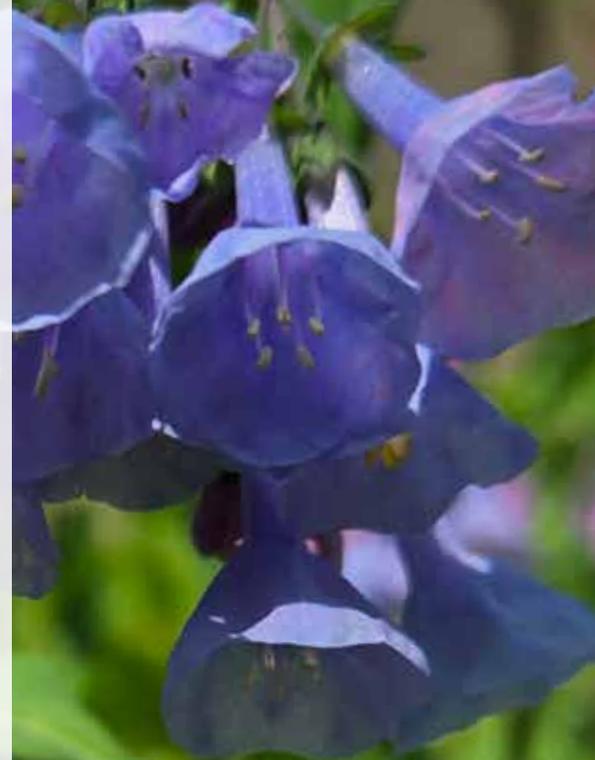
**Conservation is a benefit to all.**

While each of the owners has a different story to tell, they have one thing in common: a love for the land that has brought them closer to nature, each other, and the community around them. "Being here has meant getting to know a lot of local people. Getting connected with the surrounding community has been an unexpected bonus," says Tom. Luckily for the community, another piece of the Driftless, where life seemingly moves slower, has been permanently protected. Maybe it's magic after all.

*Photos by Abbie Church, Conservation Director*



*Story by Mitchel Block,  
Conservation Specialist*



Virginia bluebells (above), Dutchman's breeches, spring beauties, rue anemons, trout lilies, and many other ephemeral spring wildflowers brighten the forest floor and feed early insects with their pollen and nectars.

# Outdoor learning for you and your friends and family!



Linked to the Land guided hikes and workshops are FREE and made possible with support from Olson Solar Energy, WXOW News 19, and Conservancy members like you. Everyone is welcome to sign up for our newsletter (*link at the bottom of our website homepage*) to learn about upcoming Linked to the Land activities and other events. This information is also available on our Facebook page.



There were few complaints about the lack of snow for the Valentine's hike in February. Three groups walked New Amsterdam Grasslands as staff and board members shared information about the many habitat restoration projects that have been completed there over the years since the Conservancy's acquisition of the property. They also learned about the rare grassland nesting birds who benefit from the restored native habitats. Participants of all ages enjoyed the Valentine's treats at the end of the walk, where they mingled in the sunshine and learned about upcoming hikes and activities.

From beginners to experts, a bevy of birders attended the annual guided bird walk offered at Sugar Creek Bluff on International Migratory Bird Day back in May. Our friends from Ferryville Tourism co-host this walk with us each year.

Equally popular was the first guided bird walk at Plum Creek Conservation Area on the Lower Kickapoo River. Sixty bird species were identified during the two-hour hike, and the hike guides helped participants follow their ears to find the woodland nesting birds.



As always, guided tours of Kickapoo Caverns amazed all who attended. In addition to habitat for hibernating bats, the caves embody the beauty and ever-changing nature of karst geology in our corner of Wisconsin, illustrating the importance of land and water protection above ground.

With the very latest information about the health of bat populations in Wisconsin, the DNR's Jennifer Redell shared hopeful insights about the resilience of some bats in the face of environmental changes.

# A BIG year at Plum Creek Conservation Area



*By Michael Reitz, Restoration Ecologist*

In 2024, a draft management plan for the Plum Creek Conservation Area (PCCA) you helped protect has been developed based on feedback from partners, our climate mitigation workshop, a forest survey, and other site visits. The plan includes an outline for the next 20 years of management, including near-term priorities we've started implementing and long-range goals we've begun working toward. Now, in 2024, we've begun implementing the plan and seeing the impact on the landscape. Here are some highlights of recent and upcoming projects at the property:

- In late May, 11,200 trees were planted across 18.5 acres of corn field to reconnect interior forest habitat. Tree species included red oak, white oak, bur oak, swamp white oak, hackberry, and black cherry – all selected for their climate resilience and value for wildlife. I returned to the site on 7/24, and some seedlings are already nearly 5 feet tall! (see next page)
- The DNR reforestation team established permanent plots in the tree planting area to monitor the growth of the seedlings.
- We signed a 10-year Conservation Reserve Program contract to plant diverse pollinator prairie into 172 acres of agriculture field previously planted in row crops. The contract provides over \$30,000 in an annual rental payment over the 10-year contract. Income generated from the property will help with expenses, including property taxes and habitat management.
- We are working to negotiate and implement a new grazing strategy to protect sensitive forested areas and we are using cattle to control invasive species.
- A bird survey of PCCA was completed in early July. The data will help inform management practices to support the bird population on site.
- We collaborated with Ducks Unlimited to apply for a large-scale North America Wetland Conservation Act grant to support floodplain restoration along with Plum Creek stream restoration efforts.
- We hosted a guided migratory bird hike at PCCA in June to showcase the property and the abundance of birds that live there.
- During a visit this spring, we documented a small remnant prairie on the site (photo below). We plan to clear encroaching vegetation to help expand this prairie to its former glory.
- A brochure (available on our website) was developed to encourage hiking and access to the property. Signs have been posted at access points.
- An acoustic bat monitoring device was borrowed from the DNR and placed on site for a 2-week survey. The data will be compiled into a report that will help guide our bat conservation efforts.
- Your summer intern crew began clearing invasive brush along trails over a mile long, in total. The trails serve as access for restoration work and will also help serve as firebreaks as we begin to implement prescribed fire in the future.

**We look forward to sharing future updates  
on the progress we're making at  
Plum Creek with your support! ~ Michael**

# Volunteers plant hope for the future

By Kären Solverson,  
Communications Associate



*To all the people who volunteer in the field, in the office, on the board, at events, or in other ways, thank you for your kindness and selfless service.*

*Because of your actions, our native plants, insects and animals have a fighting chance at living their best possible lives and doing what they do for us here in the Driftless Area.*



During our recent volunteer tree-planting day at Plum Creek Conservation Area, I walked past an older gentleman who had been working tirelessly for hours. In spite of the heat as the day went on, he never stopped moving, and he seemed to be very driven to complete his task. When I asked him what motivated him to spend the day with us doing this dirty, sweaty, taxing work, he paused thoughtfully and said, "I guess it goes without saying that I will never have the chance to see this place when these trees grow up, but I guess that is exactly the point, isn't it?"

In a world where so many seek fame and recognition, these volunteers are the quiet, diligent workers who join us in humble service to the land without a thought about recognition. There are no ticker tape parades or names on a Jumbotron to celebrate their accomplishments. They just show up, work hard, and go home satisfied that their work truly made a difference. The perseverance of these volunteers is what is helping us build more resilience in the native habitats of the Driftless Area.

Developing this new forest at Plum Creek Conservation Area is just one part of our goal to establish a corridor of resilient habitats along the Kickapoo River that will help lessen the impact of unpredictable weather events. This planting will create a canopy of mixed tree species that slows the movement of rainwater to protect soil and water while capturing and storing carbon from the atmosphere. It also will provide habitat for birds, insects, mammals and amphibians who seek a refuge in a warming climate. The actions we take today reflect the dream of what we want our Driftless Area to look like six or seven generations from now.

On the drive to the tree planting event, a thirteen-year-old son asked his father, "Why are we doing this?" A typical question from a teenager, but his dad, John Kelly told us that this question "spurred a serious and mutually enlightening conversation about what each generation owes to the next, and about what humanity as a whole owes the flora and fauna of the planet." Not only did



John and his son make some great memories, but they also played a key role in creating future homes for the endangered and threatened birds who need this space for feeding, shelter, and raising their young.

After planting 50 trees with her friend, Deanna Cina shared, "Your participation, however small or big, is compounded by the collective efforts of all the volunteers. Every single action matters." Tackling a task of this size can seem daunting, but having a group of like-minded folks around you makes the time go quickly, and it doesn't feel as much like work. Throughout the day, volunteers talked quite a bit about what this space would look like in five, ten, or even fifty years, and how many thousands of birds and other animals would eventually call this place home.

According to The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool, a mature forest of this size could average 3.7 metric tons of carbon sequestration annually and store over 1,200 metric tons of carbon total.

Standing at the entrance to the newly planted field, it's difficult to grasp the size and scope of this project or to understand the concept of 11,200 trees. Even more staggering is thinking about how each mature oak tree, from the bottoms of its roots to the tips of its leaves, will provide a home for more than 2,300 species of wildlife. When you do the math, the spike in biodiversity in this area will be exponential as the forest grows to maturity. That diversity is critical to the health of the ecosystem in light of the ongoing shifts in our environment.

Because of two forward-thinking business plans, Spartek's Carbon Offset Initiative and Xcel Energy's Sustainability Initiative, we were able to defray the cost of some of the trees, labor, and materials needed for this endeavor.

No one may ever know the name of the person who planted the 20 white oak trees in the second row, or who filled five garbage bags full of invasive weeds to give the native plants room to grow. No one may ever know, but these generous volunteers will remember their part in the project.

## Ways to encourage volunteerism in others:

- **Plan a volunteering party. Invite a group of 4 to 5 friends to join you at one of our volunteer workdays, and then invite them over to share dinner or beverages with you.**
- **Ask if your place of employment offers incentives for employees to volunteer for nonprofits. If they don't, ask if they would consider sponsoring a block of time for a group of employees to volunteer at an event. We would be happy to share that good news through our communications channels!**
- **Model the desire to help make the world a better place in front of young people. They may not be thrilled at first to go somewhere to do manual labor, but young volunteers have consistently reported feeling good about their volunteering experience at the end of an event. Going out for ice cream after the event is always a fun bonus, too!**



Photos by Kären Solverson



Learn more about volunteer opportunities at [MississippiValleyConservancy.org/volunteer](https://MississippiValleyConservancy.org/volunteer)

# Volunteer spotlight

## The “plant guy” who’s caring for the land

By Sarah Bratnaber,  
Communications Director



We were delighted when George Riggin signed up to help guide cave tours back in 2018, even though we weren’t fully aware of his extensive conservation background. Since then, we’ve become ever more appreciative of all he brings to our outreach and habitat restoration activities.

You may have read about George in the news back in early 2024, when he and a DNR biologist spotted a population of Maryland senna (*Senna marilandica*), a rare plant not seen here in southwest Wisconsin since 1911. He is a trained volunteer for the DNR’s Rare Plant Monitoring Program, and the discovery was part of the ongoing



“treasure hunt” he enjoys as part of that program.

George has been steeped in conservation work for most of his adult life. He worked for the DNR on a Richland County bobwhite quail management project in the ‘70s, and he was hired to lead crews of youth workers with the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) in the ‘80s. There, he eventually became administrator of WCC’s conservation projects throughout the state. Later, he became administrator of work projects for Operation Fresh Start, a local nonprofit youth corps in Dane County, where in 2008 he initiated a program of year-round conservation crews.

George says he’s “a plant guy.” He learned vegetable gardening as a kid when he was hired by an elderly neighbor who needed help with his garden. In 1993, George and his late wife, Lianne VanWyhe, launched one of Wisconsin’s first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations on their land in Richland County. Today, he raises prairie violets, purple milkweed, and hairy wild petunia to collect their seeds for restoration plantings at Hogback State Natural Area and elsewhere.

George first learned about the Conservancy when he attended an awards banquet in Madison back in 2008, where our organization was named the Wisconsin Land Trust of the Year. Now, 16 years later, he has helped the Conservancy restoration team on numerous occasions at several of the properties you’ve protected, including Boscobel Bluffs, Kickapoo Caverns, and Plum Creek Conservation Area. When asked why he volunteers with us, George said, “MVC is an outstanding organization, and I appreciate it whenever I see the bluffs and vistas along the Mississippi River.” He also said he enjoys volunteering as a way of getting out and meeting other conservation-minded people.

The feeling is mutual, George. We appreciate your generous contributions of knowledge, experience, and love of the land.

**We invite you tell us about yourself and how you’d like to get involved on the volunteer page of our website at: [www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer)**

George Riggin has generously volunteered his experience and time at a number of Conservancy project sites since 2018! Here he is (at left) on a hot day in May of this year, ready to start planting trees with a crew of staff and volunteers.



## On the job training

Summer interns build their skills, thanks to you!

*By Payton Lott, Restoration Coordinator*

This summer, the Conservancy hosted seven amazing land management interns and two Field Crew Leaders. Together, they completed a variety of conservation projects across dozens of nature preserves and private conservation easement properties. Projects ranged from pulling invasive garlic mustard, to clearing invasive shrubs, to timber stand improvement projects! Every day they were able to learn and practice their skills in conservation and habitat restoration.

For a few of them, the summer land management internship was an opportunity to experience conservation field work for the first time. For others, the land management internship allowed them to hone skills they developed during college.

After completing a chainsaw safety and skills course, the interns practiced identifying native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers. They also learned native birds, bees, butterflies, and reptiles! All of them are now budding ecologists and ready to apply all the knowledge they have acquired.

Every one of the nine interns is interested in a natural resources career. Many plan to start their early careers right here in the Driftless Area! Watching them develop important skills for conservation jobs has been rewarding for the Conservancy team, who know that young people are integral to the future resilience of the Driftless Area. We look forward to seeing all the exciting careers these awesome individuals will have in the future!

Your support allowed us to hire and deploy **two** intern crews again this summer! Thank you for helping the next generation of conservationists learn the tools and techniques of the trade while restoring twice as much native habitat in Wisconsin's Driftless Area. Above: (left to right back row) Restoration Coordinator Payton Lott, Shawn Witchelt, Presley Hasse, Riley Hubanks, Jaylen Vinney, Alexandria Stone, Danielle Hudson, Ian McGuigan, Zach Stortz, (front) Ryan Reed. *Photo by Kären Solverson*

# Better than we found it:

## Building resilience at Trempealeau Lakes

By Joe Hammes



**D**espite the near-record floods that hit the area earlier this summer, the Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve is flourishing, thanks to you and dedicated volunteers and staff.

The mix of 1,500 swamp white oak, silver maple, and river birch trees planted by volunteers in spring of 2023 are thriving. These trees, which replaced the mature pines previously on the property, are integral to our habitat restoration efforts. They fulfill key goals outlined in our DNR-approved habitat management plan. Alongside these newly planted trees, a large native cottonwood is spreading its seeds across the area, further enriching the landscape.

The newly planted trees, native to the Driftless Area, are well-suited to the site and will require minimal maintenance once established. As they mature, they will offer crucial benefits, including providing diverse wildlife habitats, capturing carbon dioxide, preventing soil erosion, and safeguarding water quality.

Your support has been vital in our ongoing efforts to enhance and protect the 55-acre Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve. This area, located within the “Mississippi River Large River Corridor,” is recognized as being of

“Continental Significance” by Wisconsin’s Wildlife Action Plan. With a half mile of frontage on Second Lake and adjacency to the Trempealeau Lakes State Fishery Area, it is within one half-mile of the USFWS National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, attracting nature enthusiasts and anglers alike.

Looking ahead, we are excited about potential future collaboration on habitat management with partners like Friends of the Trempealeau Lakes, an advocacy group spearheaded by Bud Hammes, a member of our Board. This community initiative aims to promote conservation and appreciation for the First, Second, and Third Lakes of Trempealeau. They are working to create water quality awareness with community members and surrounding landowners and farmers. Stay tuned for more updates as we continue to make strides in conserving and celebrating this beautiful landscape that will serve all into the future!

Above: Shown are just a few of the many beautiful native species who belong to the wildlife community at Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve that YOU protect: riverine clubtail by Dan Jackson; prothonotary warbler by Allen Blake Sheldon; western painted turtle by Allen Blake Sheldon

# It's never too late to sign up for the Trail Trek Challenge!

Sign up and get a FREE trail guide at [www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc](http://www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc)



*Please join us in thanking these Conservation Partners and Supporters*

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## Better together

Together, we can do more to protect undeveloped land and protect clean water for all. That includes all who need forests, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands to nourish their bodies, lift their spirits, and connect with nature.

If you are 70½ or older, you can donate to Mississippi Valley Conservancy directly from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA) without it being considered a taxable withdrawal. And if you are over 72, the gift can count toward your required minimum distribution. You will need this information to complete a donation from your IRA:

Our legal name: Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Inc.  
Our mailing address: 1309 Norplex Drive, Suite 9, La Crosse, WI 54601  
Our federal tax ID number: 39-1871201

Photo by Payton Lott



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**Like us on Facebook for more news!**

Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved more than 25,900 acres of blufflands, prairies, wetlands, streams, and farmlands in Wisconsin's Driftless Area since its founding in 1997. Nearly 7,000 acres are open to the public for hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowshoeing.

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# Save the date! November 8, 2024



## Join us for *Rooted in Resilience*, our annual fall fundraiser.

Get ready for a rollicking good time at our biggest event of the year!  
 Fun and games, harvest dinner, silent and LIVE auctions with the best  
 of the Driftless Area for you! Everyone is welcome.  
 Invitations mail in late September.

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