



Conservancy Notes

SPRING 2023

Partners protecting dark skies for all

It's a delight to get away from city lights to enjoy the sights of planets, stars, and galaxies on clear, dark nights. Like old friends, the heavenly bodies above give us a sense of place, memories of the past, and musings about other life in the universe. But dark skies are becoming scarce, and that's affecting wildlife, people, and the planet.

For many wildlife species, dark skies are key to survival. They depend upon the darkness of night for migration, navigation, protection, and good hunting. Artificial lighting disrupts many of those activities, and big city lights aren't the only problem. Street lights, farmyard lights, and even home lighting contribute to light pollution. One tragic result occurs when insects that birds need for food fly toward artificial lights and birds follow them, resulting in confusion, exhaustion, and fatal collisions for many birds – especially during migration seasons.

The good news is that there are many ways to effectively light homes, businesses, and cities while minimizing light pollution. Properly shielded and downcast lighting, along with use of the right light bulbs, reduces light pollution and saves energy while minimizing the disruption of artificial light.

To help protect dark skies in an area with a high level of biodiversity, Mississippi Valley Conservancy, Wildcat Mountain State Park, and Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR) have announced that they are working together to designate 13,300 acres of Tunnelville Cliffs, Wildcat, and KVR as Wisconsin's second International Dark Sky Park. The International Dark-Sky Association awards this distinction to "land possessing an exceptional or distinguished quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, cultural heritage, and/or public enjoyment."

The application process requires a sky quality survey, lighting inventory and management plan, community partners, and education and outreach. The partners are being assisted in this initiative by John Heasley, Marla Lind, Scott Lind, and Susan Cushing. *continued on page 3*

Above: "Around the bend" photo by Dave Delap shows the Milky Way over a covered bridge at Kickapoo Valley Reserve in the proposed Dark Sky Park.

A message from Carol

Night and day . . . you are the one!

Here on our ridgetop farm in the middle of nowhere, the sky is wonderfully dark at night. As night falls, I stand and watch the gradual change from deep orange, to yellow, to white as the full moon slowly creeps above the horizon and over the treetops to light up the farmyard.

I tilt my head back and look up to take in a myriad of twinkling lights, the brightest being Venus, Jupiter, and Mercury. As I look to the north, there's the Big Dipper, right where it should be, making everything feel just right.

Now my ears hear a chorus of spring peepers filling the air with their melody and enthusiasm for the new season. Off to the west I hear a great horned owl advertising its territory with deep, soft hoots: hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo. As the moon lights up the night sky, in the valley below our farm I hear the call of a coyote as it defends its pack and informs intruders that they are not welcome.

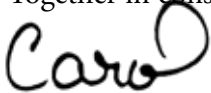
The expansive dark night skies remind me of you. Because you support the work that is required whether it is day or night. Conservation is a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year job, and you are always with us, making a difference day and night.

Your support provides deeply creviced oaks and shagbark hickory trees for bats to roost in during the day and venture out from at night to scoop up thousands of insects for dinner. You provide cool forest bottoms for the eastern whip-poor-will and wetlands teeming with croaking frogs, hopping crickets, and scampering salamanders. You support the clean, cool streams needed by fish for breeding and by beavers for raising their families.

Day or night, the land, water, and air you support are supporting them. You are saving the Driftless...*for them* – the plants and animals of our unique and very special Driftless Area.

Thank you – you are the sun, the moon, and the stars of conservation!

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director



Partners protecting dark skies for all Continued from page 1

The benefits of creating the Kickapoo Valley Dark Sky Park include a healthier community and ecosystem, the financial benefits of astrotourism, the pride of being a world-leading community, and financial savings owing to reduced energy usage. But most important is preserving our heritage of starry skies for the enjoyment and awe of future generations.

Tunnelville Cliffs, one of the nature preserves you've protected, is part of the proposed Kickapoo Valley Dark Sky Park, and you can see our recommended stargazing points on the trail map for that property on our website.

Exploring the dark skies of the Kickapoo Valley is simple. Turn off your lights, give your eyes time to adapt to the dark, and look up. Print or pick up a copy of the monthly Sky Map (skymaps.com) to find your way around. Using a red light to find your way around in will help to preserve your night vision and binoculars will help you to see more colors and details. Please be considerate in your use of artificial light at night so that others may enjoy the view. And watch our calendar for stargazing events in 2023 (see page 4)!

The project partners intend to share practical information to help individuals, businesses, and communities to conserve light, energy, and money by improving their lighting. Some of this information is already available (below and at www.darksky.org). *Written by Sarah Bratnober and John Heasley*



The partners have launched the program as an "initiative" as they await approval for official designation as an International Dark Sky Park.

The logo was designed by Jordyn York, a UWL student, during her 2022 internship at Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

LIGHT TO PROTECT THE NIGHT

Five Lighting Principles for Responsible Outdoor Lighting



1 Useful



Use light only if it is needed

All light should have a clear purpose. Consider how the use of light will impact the area, including wildlife and their habitats.

2 Targeted



Direct light so it falls only where it is needed

Use shielding and careful aiming to target the direction of the light beam so that it points downward and does not spill beyond where it is needed.

3 Low Level



Light should be no brighter than necessary

Use the lowest light level required. Be mindful of surface conditions, as some surfaces may reflect more light into the night sky than intended.

4 Controlled



Use light only when it is needed

Use controls such as timers or motion detectors to ensure that light is available when it is needed, dimmed when possible, and turned off when not needed.

5 Color



Use warmer color lights where possible

Limit the amount of shorter wavelength (blue-violet) light to the least amount needed.

The Farm Bill: What will it do for conservation?

by Dave Skoloda

At the first listening session by legislators seeking to renew the five-year farm bill, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Glenn G.T. Thompson (R-Pennsylvania) stressed the importance of bipartisan action to gain approval by a September deadline. The bill will ultimately set the course for spending some \$1.4 trillion over the next ten years, so it's a big deal for farmers, consumers, and all who value the land and want to conserve and protect it, including the members and partners of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy.

Thompson's assertion that the bill affects everyone in the country, soon played out in the citizens' 3-minute comments over two hours in Tulare County, California on

Feb. 14. For example, a representative of Ducks Unlimited told the lawmakers that conservation programs such as agricultural easement program and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) – an important contributor to MVC's restoration efforts – are "oversubscribed," meaning there are not enough funds to meet high demand.

With divided government – the House controlled by Republicans and the Senate by Democrats – a bipartisan bill is a must. The Farm Bill has had a history of bipartisan agreements gained by compromises on contentious issues. This year will be no different, as Democrats on the committee want to make farmers partners in fostering

Many landowners who conserve their land with the Conservancy have benefited from Farm Bill programs, such as 1) managing oak savanna at our Tunnelville Cliffs nature preserve with Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds and volunteer support; 2) assistance with establishing a sustainable grazing system on the Weigandt farm in Richland County; and 3) establishing permanent native cover on highly erodible land where row crops were previously grown at the Helgren & Radek property in Crawford County.



Mark your calendar for these FREE guided hikes and workshops!

Details and registration* are updated throughout the year on our website. Sign up for our free e-newsletter (see bottom of website home page) or follow us on Facebook for updates and reminders about upcoming activities.

www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/events-calendar



June 10	WILDFLOWER WONDERS WALK	Borah Creek
July 22	BAT CAVE ECOLOGY TOURS	Kickapoo Caverns
Aug 19	PRAIRIE POLLINATORS WALK	Mathy Bluff Prairie
Sept 9	MUSHROOM FORAY	Cassville Bluffs
Oct 7	PRAIRIE STARGAZING WALK	Tunnelville Cliffs

*Details are subject to change and advance registration is required for all activities.

climate change sustainability while a prominent Republican on the committee warns against “railroading” farmers into climate action. Agriculture interests will push for programs that remain voluntary with compensation for participation.

The elephant in the farm bill chambers is the nutrition program, primarily SNAP (formerly food stamps), which consumes some 76 percent of the funding in the latest bill, and even more if some of the supplements in benefits that came during the pandemic are retained in the future.

Other claims on funding include Forest Service needs for fire fighting, crop insurance for rising losses in extreme weather, and efforts to link the bill to immigration reform so farmers will have a dependable supply of labor. The portion of money allotted to conservation is likely to grow from only about 7 percent in the existing bill.

Supplemental spending that was not part of the Farm Bill

was huge due to the pandemic. Farm Bill negotiators will review those spending levels, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), which provides Farm Bill details at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RS22131.pdf>.

Jim Costa (D-CA) said at the end of the first hearing that legislators regarded food as a national security issue, hence the bipartisan nature of the bill. “We’ll get it done,” said Kevin McCarthy, House Speaker, who also promised a bipartisan bill.

The Conservancy will follow the Farm Bill negotiations and provide a heads-up when there are opportunities to make comments to legislators.

Derrick Van Orden, a Republican newly elected to represent Wisconsin’s Third Congressional District, which includes the Driftless Area, is a member of the House Agriculture Committee. He has said recently that he wants to work for a bipartisan bill and wants to hear from constituents. His La Crosse office is at 210 7th St S Suite 204, La Crosse, WI 54601 Phone: (608) 782-2558 or (202) 225-5506



In memory of a devoted conservationist

Bob Fisher 1939-2023

Steadfast, he was, in many local efforts to advance Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic – decades ago in regional planning work, later in a biodiversity task force that documented the importance of trees and nature access to human physical and mental health, in fighting the emerald ash borer in his arborist role, in planning for annual events to honor Leopold, and, thankfully, in decades of service to Mississippi Valley Conservancy where, as secretary and executive board member, he had a voice in decisions of great consequence for sustainable land conservation in the Driftless Area he loved. He led by example, protecting his own land with an easement.

A gentle and kind man was Bob Fisher, our colleague and friend. We are so grateful for what he has given us and the trees he loved.



Bob was recognized with the Conservancy’s Lifetime Conservation Achievement Award at our annual meeting in 2023.

by *Drake Hokanson*



Dick Meloy is one of 27 landowners who have permanently protected their Kickapoo Valley land with the Conservancy. The watershed is one of the Conservancy's priority areas, where we also protect four nature preserves with public access between Wilton and Wauzeka. The Conservancy now protects more than 6,000 acres in the Kickapoo Valley.

30 years of conserving land in the Kickapoo River Valley

Today's media feeds are full of stories about where to find happiness in a changing world, and Dick Meloy could add his story to the mix. His "happy place" is a 169-acre slice of heaven along the Bishop Branch of the Kickapoo River, a few miles east of Viroqua, Wisconsin.

He smiles like an indulgent grandfather as he describes his home. "From out on the highway you can see the trout stream, the hills, the trees – there's something magnificent about it."

The view from the highway is exceptional. In the foreground, the Bishop Branch meanders serenely across a level valley that fades into the steep, wooded hillside beyond. The hills rise to the sky, scribing a bluffland horizon so characteristic of the Driftless Region. And tucked into the foot of the hills is Dick's sturdy log house. With conservation values galore, the property features more than a mile of blue-ribbon trout stream, an expanse of river bottom wetlands and grasslands, more than 100 acres of prime woodland with dry prairie relicts and fine overlooks of the valley.

Dick and his late wife, Janet, bought the property in 1993 after falling in love with it from the highway. Two years later they built their cabin at the foot of the hills looking out toward the Bishop Branch.

Like many landowners in the region who are committed to preservation, Dick and Janet worried about succession. "I wondered, what's going to happen to this property when I'm no longer here?" said Dick. He did some research about conservation easements and found Mississippi Valley Conservancy. He liked what he discovered, and together with staff, developed a conservation easement that both protected the land and allowed for the improvements that Dick and Janet wished to make. That was in 2005.

As anyone who owns rural property knows, the land doesn't take care of itself. Over the years Dick has worked with multiple agencies to preserve and restore important features of the property. He hired a specialist to write a detailed forest management plan. He worked with Land and Water Conservation of Vernon County and Trout Unlimited on significant restoration work on the trout stream.

He learned his love for the outdoors as a kid fly fishing with his dad, so it's no surprise that he is especially protective of his bit of the Kickapoo River watershed.

After Janet's passing, Dick upgraded the cabin and moved in full time. Looking out at the snowy valley, Dick considers his long commitment to the land. "You can't fool with mother nature," he said. "She'll do what she's going to do. But you can work with her."

Dick is pleased with his 18-year partnership with Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the expertise of the staff. "They've been excellent," he said. "If you need them, they're there. If you don't, they won't bother you. If I need something, I know who to call. It's the only way to go."



*“With the easement, I know this property
will remain as part of mother nature.”*

~ Dick Meloy

Mastodon Valley Farm: a driftless inspiration

by Frank Dravis

Peter Allen was only six months from completion of his doctorate degree when he he dropped out of school and bought a farm in Richland County.

Allen's decision to leave school was opposed by just about everyone he knew, but he felt putting off getting established on the land would cost him precious "momentum" – he was done reading about ecological restoration – now was the time to take action.

Today, he's excited to see how the farm will look 20 and 30 years into the future.

Here at the Conservancy, we're excited, too. We loved learning about Peter's method of protecting oak savanna – a goal we have in common.

Every day, more innovative farmers and landowners are learning more ways to practice smart ecologically and economically sustainable ways to protect and manage their land. Mastodon Valley Farm is a ready example for those of us who live in and love southwestern Wisconsin.

The farm encompasses 220 acres in the Kickapoo Valley of Wisconsin's Driftless Area. It is typical of the kind of farmstead you will find here – a mixture of steep bluffsides, ridgetop fields, valley pastures, trout streams, pure hardwood stands, and oak savanna, which, unfortunately, are fast disappearing. Peter Allen, proprietor of the farm, has made it his strategic focus to restore and sustainably maintain the oak savanna and earn a living doing it.

The loss of oak savanna and its importance in our total ecosystem is well documented, from Oregon to Kansas to Michigan. In the middle, of course, is Wisconsin. Oak savanna, a grassland that's lightly forested with oaks, is biologically diverse and prolific in the generation of life. The diversity far outstrips that of pure old-growth forests, which are also endangered. Where are oak savannas going? To farmland and, ironically, to emergent forests of pioneer species. In a way, oak savanna, as an incubator, is a victim of its own success.

Using a broad timescale, the task of maintaining oak savanna was tended by mastodons that grazed the land 12,000 years ago. Yes, the same mastodons that Peter Allen's farm is named after. Those large herbivores would rigorously graze the land and then move on, leaving the random oak seed-trees behind.

Later, when the mastodons succumbed to humankind and geologic climate change, Native Americans assumed the role of savanna custodians. They burned the grassland to maintain open land for pasture. Living a nomadic life, the indigenous populations maintained the oak savanna with much the same results the mastodons did. They were aided in the effort by a unique trait of oaks: the bark is fire resistant.

Today, more and more innovative landowners are reapplying these ancient natural practices in the Driftless. While Peter may not have a herd of mastodons, he does have a herd of cows, sheep, goats, and pigs. Through rotational grazing he can maintain the savanna and generate farm income. Each animal species





Peter and Maureen Allen are raising their family off the grid in a cabin they built in Richland County, using solar power and driving eleven miles for Internet access.

has its role, both as farm machinery and as food producer. The cattle do the grazing and mowing. The pigs do the rooting and tilling. The sheep do the close grazing, and the goats do the clearing. Together, they build soil health, giving the practice its name, *regenerative farming*.

Peter organizes the grazing into paddocks, each an acre or more in size, depending on the landscape. In the farm's beautiful and rugged driftless topography there are numerous microclimates due to the varying orientations of the bluff faces. Different native species thrive in each microclimate and Peter plans grazing based on what's optimal for each area.

Goat prairie, old growth forests, oak savanna, and others form what is, across Wisconsin, a dwindling patchwork of species sanctuaries. Fortunately, more of us, like Peter, are learning from nature's practices tested over millennia and are sustaining these sanctuaries and doing it profitably. Humankind is a mammalian species. We are as much a part of earth and its history as mastodons, so it is reasonable for us to mimic them. For more insights into regenerative farming, the Driftless region, and the work at Mastodon Valley Farms, please see this Outdoors Wisconsin video: <https://youtu.be/Kai2SI06QQI>

The Allens have started a meat marketing enterprise to help make their ecological restoration project economically viable. Like many ecological agrarians, they sell to the environmentally conscious consumer to financially support their mammal-powered method of managing the landscape.

Peter also offers an annual one-week course on designing permaculture farming systems that combine livestock, grass, and woodlands.



The farm sells its meat utilizing the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model.





Volunteer today to plant trees for tomorrow!

Since you helped us acquire the Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve in 2009, a number of restoration activities have taken place on the land, and the current project is by far the biggest. Our management plan for the nature preserve has long included replacing the nine-acre planted stand of pine trees with diverse native tree species. The restored floodplain forest will provide better support for a growing corridor of protected habitats for songbirds, pollinators, and other native wildlife while protecting its vital role as a functional floodplain.

Many hands make light work!

Help us plant 1,500 tiny trees from May 25-27!

The trees to be planted include swamp white oak, silver maple, and river birch. In addition to the habitat they provide, they will capture and store carbon dioxide, prevent erosion, and protect water quality. These species are well adapted to their environment and require little care after they become established. All of these benefits strengthen our land's resilience to a changing climate.

The project began with harvest of the pines in December of 2021, and the replanting will happen in just a couple of weeks. The more volunteers we recruit, the easier the job will be!

Volunteers will be grouped into teams, and each person will be responsible for a part of the tree planting process: digging a hole and planting a tiny tree, inserting a support stake, and installing a protective tube around the tree and stake. We'll provide tools and training each morning and afternoon until the job is done.

For anyone who's not up for tree planting, we could also use help managing the food table, signing in volunteers, and helping with other tasks to make things go smoothly. Details and sign-up at:
www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/events-calendar



Sharing their gift for the future

Ron and Jane Rada were drawn to La Crosse in 1975 not only because of career opportunities but also because of the unique natural resources of the area. They became members of Mississippi Valley Conservancy in 1998 and later joined the Stewardship Circle mainly because of the following observations they shared about the Conservancy:

- Built on a visionary mission,
- Served by an aspirational board and staff,
- Well suited for sustaining the unique and irreplaceable resources of the Driftless Area through its many conservation efforts, collaborations, and educational programs,
- Demonstrated exceptional integrity and expertise as stewards of the funds and lands entrusted to it.

“Our goal in becoming members of the Stewardship Circle is in some small way to help ensure that this vast river valley and ecosystem are sustained. We feel privileged to live here and want others to be able to experience the Driftless Area and the Mississippi, one of the great rivers of the world, as we have.”

- Ron and Jane Rada

Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge

The Stewardship Circle is a special group of land conservation supporters who have made a lasting commitment to land protection through a variety of estate-planning tools. Right now you have an amazing opportunity to join them and expand the work of protecting, caring for, and restoring the unique and beautiful Driftless Area for the benefit of everyone. When you make a planned gift, \$1,000 will be donated to Mississippi Valley Conservancy in your honor from the Stewardship Circle Bequest Challenge Grant. Details are on our website at www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ways-give.



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Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a regional, nonprofit land trust based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The Conservancy has permanently conserved more than 25,000 acres of bluffslands, 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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Are you ready for the Challenge?

Registration is now open for the seventh annual Trail Trek Challenge! It's a free year-round hike/walk program on the nature preserves you've helped protect in Wisconsin's Driftless Area. Challenge yourself to walk at least five of the designated trails while relaxing and rejuvenating your mind, body, and spirit.

Sign up on our website to get a downloadable trail guide with hike log and ideas for additional hikes. Each trail also has a downloadable map and a nature scavenger hunt for those who are seeking a little extra challenge. Details and sign-up are at:

www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc