



Conservancy Notes

SPRING 2024

Doing better together for monarch butterflies

The presence of the eastern monarch butterfly population in Mexico's Oyamel fir forests this past winter was 59.3% less than the previous year, according to the most recent survey released by the World Wildlife Fund Mexico. The eastern monarch butterfly is the kind we see here in the Midwest. This is the first time since the 2013–2014 overwintering season that the eastern monarch population has dropped at such a dramatic rate.

Scientists say that the 2022-2023 decline in monarch butterfly population is likely due to drought conditions in the United States that resulted in reduced availability of native milkweed and flowering plants that provide food and nectar for the species.

Migratory monarchs are listed as vulnerable or threatened with extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, the world's leading scientific authority on the status of species.

The monarch butterfly serves as an indicator species that lets us know when there is something wrong in the environment when its numbers decline. Along with other wildlife such as bees, bats, and birds, they also assist plants

in their reproduction by pollination. The recent decline in monarch populations could be an indication of trouble facing pollinators in general, which is a threat not to take lightly, as pollinators play a key role in pollinating 35% of crops humans around the world depend on for food.

While the plight of the eastern monarch butterfly is troubling, it is something the Conservancy is working to turn around, thanks to the support of volunteers and members like you. There are many actions that individuals and communities can take to help. More about these activities and resources available from our partners are on page 3.

*Above: Monarch butterflies enjoy the nectar of blazing star blossoms.
Photo by Tom Rhorer*

Change offers opportunity

It's Saturday afternoon and all my chores are done. Daisy and Duke are rambunctious, and I have a yearning to explore. It's time for a hike!

I absolutely love hiking in the spring. The forest floor feels like a squishy, crunchy carpet. The sun is able to reach in with its light beams to illuminate the tiniest signs of spring. The wide-open understory allows me to see far off to the next bluff. This openness offers vision, and the vision offers me the opportunity to see what has changed.

Some of the changes can be very subtle, such as bark rubbed off a young sapling by a buck having staked its territory there. Other changes are profound. One of my favorite majestic oak trees on the south side of the farm was blown over during a windy winter storm. But, as I hike around the fallen tree, I am reminded that with every change there is also opportunity. That oak will be missed, but its young seedlings will now have space to reach up for the sun and grow to be as mighty as their mother. And soon the young fawns will be playfully romping around at their mother's side, oblivious to that territorial rub on the young sapling.

We're presented with changes every day. If we embrace change, we can seize opportunities to do better. Consider the profound change in our weather this past year. That change helps us prioritize our work and protect even more mighty forests, deep-rooted prairies, towering bluffs, vital farmlands, and diverse wetlands to mitigate some of the effects we see from a changing climate.

Thanks to you, we have opportunities to become even better stewards of the lands we care for. Opportunities to learn better ways to support biodiversity and restore resilient native habitats.

Changes can seem daunting, but changes lead to opportunities. Your support, volunteer time, leadership, wisdom, and kind words will be ever more important as we seize the opportunities to do better together for this place we all love.

Together in conservation,



Carol Abrahamzon
Executive Director





Photo by Tom Rhorer: Researchers with Monarch Joint Venture surveying a reconstructed prairie in the La Crosse Blufflands for monarchs and monarch habitat.

Things we're doing together

During last year's drought, all of the 25+ nature preserves you protect through the Conservancy provided food and nectar for monarch butterflies and many other pollinators. With your support, the Conservancy's habitat restoration work re-establishes and expands healthy prairies for pollinators on these properties.

The nature preserves are home to nine species of milkweed, including the state endangered purple milkweed. This matters because monarch adults will lay their eggs only on milkweed, and their caterpillars will eat only milkweed leaves. When you see our crews clearing brush, burning prairies, or harvesting seeds, you can be assured in knowing this work is for the benefit of monarchs and all the pollinators!

Many of the landowners who've permanently protected their private properties with the Conservancy also work hard to support the health of pollinators.

More things you can do

Whether you're in the city or in the country, you'll find valuable tips and resources for creating monarch butterfly habitat through the Wisconsin Monarch Collaborative at www.wimonarch.org. For urban dwellers, they offer plant selection and monarch-friendly gardening tips as well as municipal planting recommendations for your community. For rural landowners and farmers, they offer best management practices for creating and protecting pollinator habitat, plus information about incentive, cost-share, and technical assistance programs.

Volunteer For the Wild! Sign up to help in the field or in the office with a variety of projects that further our work to protect and restore monarch and pollinator habitat.

Support the Conservancy's habitat restoration work Donations of any amount help our crews with monarch habitat restoration projects and offer the benefits of membership with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. You can even make a legacy gift to a special fund that is solely for the support of our summer intern crews who carry out much of the habitat restoration work each year.



Photo: Monarch caterpillars at home on milkweed, the only place they will lay their eggs and the only food they will eat.

Thank you for protecting more than 25,500 acres of bluffs, forests, prairies, wetlands, and farmlands in Wisconsin's Driftless Area with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Much of that land includes pollinator-friendly habitat that supports monarch butterflies and other wildlife and plant species in this time of climate change.

After the storm . . .

a restoration update from Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area

By Levi Plath, Land Manager

The 244-acre Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area is a bluffland property that was conserved through a joint effort by Mississippi Valley Conservancy and the Wisconsin DNR in 2002. The Conservancy owns 191 acres and the Wisconsin DNR owns the remaining 53 acres. The property boasts populations of chinquapin oak, rare wildflowers, and diverse natural communities along the Mississippi River.

In 2015, a large portion of the preserve was damaged by a tornado that blew down many of the large oaks that once grew there. The Conservancy's land management crew along with the DNR State Natural Areas crew worked to clear trails on the property immediately after the tornado struck, but we quickly learned that this massive undertaking was more than we had the capacity to do on our own. We went back to the drawing board and worked with DNR Ecologist Nate Fayram to outline a plan for a salvage harvest of all the downed wood that had the potential to generate revenue to pay for land restoration projects needed to help the land heal from the catastrophic event.

In the following year, we had limited access to the ridgetop where we had recently planted 20 acres with native prairie seeds and a large number of oak seedlings for a savanna restoration project. The new plantings suffered due to our inability to get to them.

It took two winters for the contracted logger to salvage the downed trees and clean up the storm damage. As a result of the sale of the wood, we were able to establish a small fund that could be used for additional restoration work on the preserve.

With funds from the salvaged wood, we've maintained the grassland planting each year since 2018. We planted more trees in the ridgetop area in 2021, and we're planning to reintroduce prescribed fire on parts of this property to give the young oaks a chance at competing with other fast-growing tree species. This scenic nature preserve, once decimated by wind, is again regenerating and being managed for future generations.

With support from you and funding from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, the Conservancy acquired the 191-acre Cassville Bluffs State Natural Area in 2002. The adjacent 53-acre bluffland property is owned and managed by the Wisconsin DNR. It is one of the very few Mississippi River bluffs that is not separated from the river by a highway – a distinct advantage for nesting turtles, waterfowl, and other wildlife. THANK YOU!

Healing and rewarding

By Drake Hokanson

Every few weeks, Regan Finn puts on her work clothes, grabs her trimmers, a plant identification book, gloves, safety goggles, and herbicide and eagerly leaves her place in La Crosse for Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area, 35 miles down the river.

Regan is volunteer site steward for the 440-acre Mississippi Valley Conservancy property, a guardian angel of sorts who watches for erosion issues, boundary encroachment, and storm damage, and simply enjoys the bond with a particular piece of land. While on site, she hikes the land, spots wildlife, cuts and treats invasive buckthorn, and just hangs out.

She is a May 2023 UW-La Crosse biology and sociology graduate who once figured on going into medicine. In fact, she's currently employed as an EMT. She had long been interested in conservation – especially the interaction between people and the environment. In college, she and her partner decided they wanted to try some volunteer work and found themselves at a Conservancy event. The bug bit hard, and she is now working toward a career in conservation work.

With encouragement and a couple days' training from Conservancy staff, Regan became a site steward at Sugar Creek Bluff, which features creek lowlands, oak wood-



lands, and several goat prairies. By herself and with staff help, she is learning land management, including invasives removal and identification of native plants and wildlife.

"It's healing and rewarding to remove buckthorn and other invasives and see results the following year," said Regan. She encourages others to volunteer, especially to become site stewards.

"Just do it. It's a great experience. Doing it makes you want to do more. And the more people get out there, the more we can get done."

Above: Regan Finn, a recent UWL graduate and site steward at Sugar Creek Bluff. Photo by Drake Hokanson



Are you ready to adopt a nature preserve?

If you like the idea of caring for a favorite nature preserve, consider becoming a volunteer site steward. Site stewards are the eyes and ears of Mississippi Valley Conservancy's nature preserves. Working with guidance from Conservancy staff, site stewards support us in reaching our goals in land management, habitat restoration, and educational activities on a site they choose to steward. You don't have to go it alone! We even have multiple site stewards on some properties. Learn more at www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/get-involved/site-steward. If you don't feel ready to become a site steward, consider getting out with our *For the Wild* volunteer crews to learn what land stewardship on conserved land is all about. Learn more at www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/volunteer.

Better than we found it

By Pat Caffrey, Site Steward

The Conservancy acquired New Amsterdam Grasslands (NAG) over 20 years ago. Unlike many other Conservancy properties, it was not pristine habitat, but rather 310 acres of former cropland that had been enrolled in the farm bill Conservation Reserve Program. However, it did provide surrogate habitat for a variety of grassland nesting birds, a category of birds whose global populations have plummeted more than any other.

Henslow's sparrows, a species listed as threatened in Wisconsin, nest there. They like dense grass with a buildup of thatch and avoid nesting within 100 meters of trees or tall shrubs. Another threatened species, Bell's vireo, likes dense thickets of brush with a "green edge" of leaves and vines down to the ground, surrounded by open grassland. Habitat for both species, and about 10 others listed as Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including meadowlark, bobolink, and dickcissel, were threatened by the brush and trees rapidly taking over the property.

Since the property's acquisition, several thousand trees and many acres of brush have been cleared to improve the grassland habitat. Approximately 180 acres of the site have been planted with native prairie species. While the existing non-native grass (smooth brome) did provide habi-

tat, studies have shown that native plant species allow greater nesting density, likely because native insects evolved with native species of plants, and insects, especially lepidoptera (moth and butterfly caterpillars), provide most of the food birds feed their nestlings.

Prescribed fire is a valuable tool to control woody species in grasslands, and we burn a section of NAG annually – usually about 40 acres. However, burning removes the thatch layer for a couple years and can kill the green edge on brush patches. The size and location of areas to be burned are planned years in advance to maintain adequate acreage of habitat for Henslow's sparrows. Mowing is used instead of fire to maintain open grassland around the brush patches in the Bell's vireo areas without losing the green edge on the brush patches. For these species, "keeping it natural" actually requires a lot of management, made possible by your support.

Managing the property for rare species would not be possible if it had not been protected in the first place. When the Conservancy acquired NAG, the surrounding properties were almost all undeveloped. Since then, three separate residential subdivisions, two large apartment complexes and an assisted living facility have been developed surrounding the property. NAG was relatively level, open, easily developable property in a high demand area, so without your support, and a very generous donation from Phil Gelatt, this valuable habitat would not exist today!

Birds of New Amsterdam Grasslands

top left to lower right

Western meadowlark

Willow flycatcher

Henslow's sparrow

Dickcissel

Bell's vireo

American woodcock





Photo by Bruce Bartel

**Challenge yourself
to five hikes in 2024-2025!
Free and fun for all ages
Online registration
opens April 28.**

www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/ttc

Better together

Together, we can do more to protect undeveloped land and clean, cold 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 Abbie Church

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

CONSERVATION PARTNERS

DIAMOND

- Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
- Olson Solar Energy
- Radisson Hotel La Crosse
- Vendi

GOLD

- Associated Bank
- Fowler & Hammer General Contractors
- J.F. Brennan Company, Inc.
- Seven Rivers Signarama
- Spartek, Inc.

SILVER

- Dairyland Power Cooperative
- driftless.earth
- F.J. Robers Co., Inc.
- Gundersen Health System
- Mayo Clinic Health System
- Organic Valley
- People's Food Cooperative
- Trust Point, Inc.
- WKBT/News 8 Now
- WXOW/News 19

CONSERVATION SUPPORTERS

- Altra Financial Advisors
- Auntie A's Sweet Treats
- Champion Solar
- Explore La Crosse
- Festival Foods
- Johns, Flaherty & Collins, SC
- Kwik Trip
- MOKA
- Optical Fashions
- Prairie Moon Nursery



1309 Norplex Drive, Suite 9
La Crosse, WI 54601
608.784.3606
mississippivalleyconservancy.org
info@mississippivalleyconservancy.org

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 25,500 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.

Board of Directors

Gretchen Pfeiffer, *President*
Allan Beatty, *Vice President*
Roy Campbell, *Treasurer*
Rob Tyser, *Secretary*
Pat Caffrey
Tim Dakin
Sue Dillenbeck
Barbara Frank (*Emerita*)
Philip Gelatt (*Emeritus*)
Julie Haas
Bud Hammes
Drake Hokanson
John Kelly
Maureen Kinney
Fred Koerschner
Karen Kouba
Dorothy Lenard
Tom Lukens
Randy Poelma
Ross Seymour
Pam Thiel
Craig Thompson (*Emeritus*)
Steve Ventura
Janet Wollam
Krysten Zummo

Staff

Carol Abrahamzon, *Executive Director*
Abbie Church, *Conservation Director*
Chris Kirkpatrick, *Conservation Manager*
Mitchel Block, *Conservation Specialist*
Connor Kotte, *Stewardship Specialist*
Michael Reitz, *Restoration Ecologist*
Levi Plath, *Land Manager*
Payton Lott, *Restoration Coordinator*
Shane Drey, *Development Associate*
Sarah Bratnaber, *Communications Director*
Karen Solverson, *Communications Associate*

Printed on paper containing mixed-use recycled content.

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 372
La Crosse, WI

Calling all volunteers!

Join us for a tree planting at Plum Creek Conservation Area.



GOAL: Plant 500 trees on Saturday, May 4th

Join our habitat restoration team to plant trees on the property you're protecting along the Lower Kickapoo River and Plum Creek in Crawford County. We'll provide tools and training for you to work with a team to plant and protect a mix of native tree species. Snacks, water, and fun included! You'll also get to hear about the conservation objectives and plans we're developing for the property with help from Wisconsin DNR, The Nature Conservancy, and Savanna Institute. Visit our website for details and sign-up: www.mississippivalleyconservancy.org/events

Above: A new crew of volunteers receives training for Day Two of a tree planting at the Conservancy's Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve in 2023.