

Once more, a new year beckons. Plans have been laid, resolutions made (and best of all, there's not yet been time to break them). The trials of the old give way to the promise of the new. And what better way to prepare for 2017 than by ignoring it completely and turning our gaze resolutely to the past? Time to take one last look at a wild and crazy year. It's 2016 in Review!

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Private Sector Land Conservation

Illinois' conservation land trusts enjoyed a busy 2016, protecting 2,116.7 acres across the state including key properties that will expand the national wildlife refuge system. The **Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation** (JDCF) and **Openlands** were at the forefront of this success. JDCF protected what by any measure is an incredible 1,347.5 acres (64% of *all* privately protected land this year). Among their half-dozen land protection projects was a 1,083.6 acre conservation easement donated by a generous landowner that seizes the record as the largest privately held natural areas-focused easement in the entire state. The depth of JDCF's work (over 5,000 acres owned or under easement within Jo Daviess County) is matched only by its breadth, seamlessly mixing restoration and management with public programs, events, and a true partnership with the local community and government that provides demonstrable and impressive results year after year. Openlands acquired two properties totaling 38 acres on opposite sides of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in the northeast of the state. These two properties, which both lie in designated core areas of the Refuge, will eventually be deeded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, providing the agency with its first fee-owned property in the quickly growing Refuge. This work both accentuates and compliments Openlands' multiple projects at the site that have been ongoing for several years and seem likely only to grow in both number and scale. Over the course of the past year, thirteen land trusts have created new preserves, partnered with governments at all levels to expand and enhance some of our state's finest examples of the natural world, and helped private landowners preserve their land in perpetuity. Let's take a look at their accomplishments, shall we?

- **Barrington Area Conservation Trust**
 - 3.8 acres of wetlands along Spring Creek in a conservation easement located in Barrington Hills, McHenry County. Situated immediately across a street to the north of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's Spring Lake Preserve (a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve), this small wetland property has the potential to be added to the Nature Preserves system as a Buffer to the Spring Lake Nature Preserve. The landowner is making such a dedication a real mid-term possibility, having embarked on an aggressive restoration of the land in partnership with BACT. Over the past year, invasive Reed Canary Grass has been pushed back, the eroded shore of the stream bank has been reshaped to create a gentle incline down to the stream, and native grasses,

sedges, and forbs have been planted to stabilize the bank. This combined protection & restoration effort really demonstrates the strong relationships and great support services that BACT has and provides its landowners and supporters.

- 6.42 acres (6.71 acres gross) of sedge meadow wetlands along Flint Creek in Barrington Hills, southwestern Lake County. Located along Ridge Road, this donated property, which also contains a portion of an artificial pond, hugs the main stem of the aforementioned creek as it turns north, flowing towards the Fox River. Despite flowing through a relatively suburban landscape, this portion of Flint Creek is one of the highest quality streams in Lake County, and lies upstream of additional protected and restored lands along the stream's shore, making the property a worthy addition to BACT's preserves.
- **Ducks Unlimited**
 - 308.9 acres at the northeast corner of the Sanganois State Fish and Wildlife Refuge in Mason County. The property lies adjacent to two other properties acquired by DU in 2014 and 2015 totaling an additional 1,210.5 acres. Taken together, the three sites significantly expand the Sanganois Refuge, while, more importantly, substantially improving the hydrological protection of the area and creating new opportunities for its management and enhancement. DU has been expanding and restoring the Sanganois Refuge for a decade or more; as impressive as even this single project is, it pales in comparison to the overall effort, and is a testament to the organization's vision and expertise.
- **Friends of the Kankakee**
 - Not content with formally establishing the Kankakee National Wildlife and Fish Refuge by transferring 66.1 acres to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Friends this year continued its decade-plus long process of expanding the Refuge's eventual footprint, acquiring 12 properties totaling 6.75 acres with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. This brings the combined USFWS/Friends portion of Kankakee Sands (all of which was originally acquired by Friends and the large majority of which is in Iroquois County) to 282.8 acres.
- **Great Rivers Land Trust**
 - An historic house in the Village of Elsau on 0.09 acres, built in the 1850s. This is the third such house owned and maintained by GRLT, but is the first, and this is true, to have served as the base of operations of a man whose purpose was the documentation and research of historic houses! Donated by his wife following his passing to commemorate his life and mission, GRLT has opened the former residence to the public, which has already seen hundreds of visitors.
 - 11.1 wooded acres adjacent to 18.2 previously acquired acres, all along the Rocky Fork tributary of Piasa Creek. Two nearby properties create a 70 acre protected corridor running along a waterway that flows through steep, wooded vistas on its path north and west to the creek.

- **Heartlands Conservancy**
 - 149.17 acres of dense forest and open field (the latter of which will be restored to native habitat) in northwestern Alexander County, bisected by a drainage ditch running east/west across the land. Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and the ***Grand Victoria Foundation***, the property is surrounded on three sides by the Shawnee National Forest. It will be sold to the U.S. Forest Service, thus filling a hole in the Service's ownership. One of the very neat aspects of this project is that the proceeds of the sale will be used to fund additional acquisitions in the project area. The area included in the sale was more than doubled thanks to Heartlands' patience and care in cultivating the landowner and explaining the property's ecological value, so this project, in addition to being a great addition to the National Forest, also offers a case study in productively working with landowners.
 - 19.9 acres of heavily forested land in southwest Jackson County also acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and the ***Grand Victoria Foundation***. Almost completely surrounded by the Shawnee National Forest, it will as with the 149 acre property described above be deeded to the U.S. Forest Service.
- **Illinois Audubon Society**
 - 394.888 acres of the 408.79 acre Green Wing Environmental Laboratory (to be renamed the Gremel Wildlife Sanctuary), previously owned and managed by Augustana College. Lying less than a half mile east of IAS' 302 acre Amboy Marsh, the Green Wing Environmental Laboratory contains a mix of dunes, savanna, and prairie and was acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and equivalent financial support from an IAS lifetime member and major donor to the project, after whom the preserve is being named. The volunteers who have long expertly cared for Amboy Marsh will now expand their work to this new site. While the property was already protected under the ownership of the college, under IAS's ownership it can be properly restored and maintained for the first time in at least 25 years. With the help contractors and IAS's experienced team of volunteers, 160 acres of wetland will be improved and restored beginning next year (in a program also funded by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***), prescribed burning will begin, and copious, *copious* quantities of invasive species will be removed. Students from the college will be actively involved with the property, documenting both a baseline and tracking changes to the flora and fauna as the restoration work proceeds. All in all, a fine project that both draws upon the local community and provides a great recreational and educational resource.
- **Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation**
 - 1,083.6 acres in a conservation easement making it, as mentioned earlier in this letter, the single largest privately held conservation easement in the state of Illinois devoted to natural areas preservation (there's one privately held easement that's larger, but it encumbers a farm in a corn/soybean crop rotation). The property's rolling topography includes extensive forests, grasslands, and agricultural fields and is less than half a mile from three other JDCF-held easements encompassing an additional 447 acres, all located in the west central portion of the County. To put this new site in perspective, there are only *five* sites owned by the Lake County Forest Preserve District that are larger than the new easement; the same goes for the McHenry County Conservation

District. The Forest Preserve District of Will County holds one such site. It's a tremendous accomplishment for both JDCF and Illinois conservation.

- 2.6 acres of woodland at the northeast corner of a JDCF-held conservation easement along US-20, acquired with the strong support of **The Conservation Fund**. The easement in turn abuts another JDCF-owned property, creating a 70 acre woodland site, transitioning to open fields in the south. Immediately north of US-20 lies a second JDCF Fee/Easement site that itself lies across a railway from a third property owned by the Foundation. Taken together, JDCF has assembled a 273 acre reserve along the eastern entrance to Galena, the County's major city.
- 79.8 acres of open fields, woodland, and to-be-restored agricultural fields acquired with strong support from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. The property lies along the northern boundary of the 100 acre Gateway Preserve, previously acquired by JDCF and then donated to the City of Galena, with JDCF receiving a conservation easement over the site. The newly acquired property is part of the same 273 acre macrosite described above, and serves to link the existing site with JDCF's Buehler Preserve immediately to the west. To be restored to a mix of prairie, savanna, and forest, JDCF will, as it did with the Gateway Preserve, deed the land to the City in return for a conservation easement. While the nonprofit will restore and manage the land, the City will install and maintain walking trails and in general make the area available for public use. All in all, the Galena Gateway project is an exceptional example of a public-private partnership with the local community.
- 159.9 acres of mostly agricultural land along the Apple River now known as the Oneota Preserve. The property, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and the **Grand Victoria Foundation**, lies adjacent to two other JDCF properties totaling 291 acres, the majority of which has been registered as an Illinois Land & Water Reserve. The property lies along the eastern extent of the larger Hanover Bluff macrosite, taking in land owned by the USFWS, IDNR, and three different land trusts, and stretching from the Mississippi River east to Illinois Route 84. The macrosite takes in 1,965 acres (including the new property) exclusive of the 22,300 acre Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, which forms the macrosite's western extent. Hanover Bluff is one of the three most impressive examples in the state of an ecological area protected by multiple stakeholders in both the public and private sectors utilizing diverse land protection tools.
- A 1 acre, partially wooded inholding of the Wapello Reserve, immediately north of the 2014 addition, bringing this eastern anchor of the now 1,966 acre Hanover Bluff macrosite to 178 acres.
- 20.6 acres of open field with a small savanna on the southeastern edge of Casper Bluff Land & Water Reserve in northwestern Jo Daviess County. Preserved with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, the **Grand Victoria Foundation**, and Google, the acquisition, which lies less than 250 feet from the thunderbird effigy mound (part of the larger Aiken Mound Group located on the site) expands the Reserve to 105.3 acres. The Casper Bluff Reserve contains at least 20 Native American mounds of various sizes and configurations, constructed by the Effigy Mounds culture in the latter

centuries of the first millennium. It's worth mentioning that the donation from Google was made as part of the firm's efforts to fully mitigate the ecological cost of constructing a new facility in Chicago. The search company reached out to JDCF because of the latter's status as an accredited land trust, demonstrating yet another potential benefit of this valuable program of the Land Trust Alliance.

- **Land Conservancy of McHenry County**

- 24.93 wetland and riparian acres in central McHenry County adjacent to Apple Creek, which bisects the site. Located in central McHenry County just south of the Village of Woodstock, the property, while containing a rather nasty patch of phragmites along the aforementioned creek includes a high quality wetland mitigation site, 5 acres of upland buffer that is adjacent to two different schools, and 13 acres of farmland. On top of everything else, it's adjacent to a 10 acre conservation easement also held by TLC.
- 30.042 acres divided between a dense woodland and the southwestern portion of a large wetland. Located on the north side of Route 120 between Woodstock and McHenry in central McHenry County, the property is home to a ~350 year old bur oak tree (yes, 350 years old) with a 58" diameter and a canopy at least 75' across. The oak embodies the area's history, while the larger property exemplifies the same. The decision to move forward with the acquisition of the property came only in December 2015. Over the following twelve months, using what to the best of my knowledge is a unique multi-year financing arrangement with their bank and major donors, the TLC team raised the entire purchase price through donations from members, a local family foundation, and every single member of the organization's Board. The land was sold by a family with whom the Conservancy has worked for over 25 years; one member of the family donated TLC's very first conservation easement in 1991 (which was *also* their first parcel of protected land!).

- **Openlands**

- 27.146 acres of wetlands bisected by Nippersink Creek with a small agricultural buffer in northern McHenry County with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, which also provided a smaller amount towards restoration work at the site. Lying within one of the Hackmatack NWR's core areas, the property lies only 1,500 feet to the north of a 26.1 acre easement acquired last year by the Land Conservancy of McHenry County which in turn sits half a mile upstream from a 1,200 acre property owned by the McHenry County Conservation District (MCCD). The property provides the second piece of a protected riverine corridor anchored by two MCCD preserves to the north and south. This corridor is the most significant and ecologically important land acquisition initiative currently underway at the Wildlife Refuge, and thus far it's being assembled wholly by the private sector. With this work, Openlands and TLC are giving form to a still relatively untested idea that envisions creating large macrosites by stitching together lands owned, managed, or eased by both the public and private sectors.
- 10.82 acres of wetlands and woodland in Richmond, in northern McHenry County acquired with the support of the ***Grand Victoria Foundation***. Located on the opposite side of the Hackmatack NWR to the 27 acre site described above, this property also lies within one of the Refuge's core areas. Located just north of a large wetland complex,

the site is the first protected piece of land in the eastern portion of the Refuge. Immediately adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's (MCCD) leased Prairie Trail North, the property both provides access to the trail and serves as the first parcel of a potential protected corridor between the MCCD's North Branch Preserve and the Glacial Park Conservation Area in the north and south, respectively.

- Last year I described a 9.32 acre property bisected by Nippersink Creek acquired by the McHenry County Conservation District from Openlands in the former Twin Creeks residential development, recounting the project, as you might expect, in the "Public Land Conservation" portion of this letter. As I wrote at the time, Openlands acquired this unbuilt housing development and is selling some lots to raise the funds necessary to preserve the balance of the property in its natural condition. While the District did indeed purchase the 9 acre property, this wouldn't have been in any way possible without Openlands' decision to embark on such a unique initiative. The organization's skill and expertise in conceiving of and executing the Twin Creeks project is as impressive as it is praiseworthy, and so I feel that they should be given just as much credit for that parcel's protection as the District. Both parties were and are essential to this entire endeavor!
- **St. Clair Greenspace Foundation**
 - A small 0.19 acre roadside addition to the 45.38 acre Bluff Park Preserve in northwestern St. Clair County.
 - 1.19 acres of heavily wooded vacated roadway ROW winding through the northernmost extent of Bluff Park Preserve just south of I-157, bringing the site to 46.57 acres.
- **Sugar Grove Foundation**
 - 7.1 wooded acres in the northeast of the 977 acre Funk's Grove Natural Area macrosite in McLean County, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Connecting the two parcels that together comprise the Stubblefield Woodlots Nature Preserve, the new property will be dedicated as a Nature Preserve addition in 2018, while the Sugar Grove Foundation will begin restoring the land this coming year by removing the significant populations of invasive flora found on the site.
- **The Conservation Foundation**
 - 91.46 acres of field and common area in a conservation easement located in the southwestern corner of DuPage County. The easement consists of the future common areas of a residential subdivision that began construction in 2016. Portions of the easement area lie adjacent to and thus buffer the 36 acre Country Lake Forest Preserve directly to the west.
 - 12.29 acres (13.26 acres gross) of a platted but unbuilt subdivision in a residential area in far east central Kane County, just east of the Fox River. The forested property was generously donated to the Foundation by its family owners. The property will be used by the Forest Preserve District of Kane County as a match for a grant in 2017 or 2018, during which it will be deeded to the District for addition to the adjacent 77 acre Fox River Bluff Forest Preserve located directly to the south.

- **The Nature Conservancy**

- 25.88 acres at Kankakee Sands, again through a mix of tax and private sales supported by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. The new properties lie adjacent to and link existing TNC holdings, further stitching together 2,460 acres spread over 40 square miles of southeastern Kane County. As I wrote last year, Kankakee Sands is one of the most intact oak savannas in Illinois, and complements the newly established Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area located to the south and directly adjacent to a portion of the TNC site.
- 32.0 acres at Nachusa Grasslands in Lee and Ogle Counties, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Predominantly wooded along with a small savanna/open field, the property, which increases the site to 3,528 fee acres (and an additional 395 acres in conservation easements), is located in the northwest of the main complex, south of Stone Barn Road.

Public Sector Land Conservation

As the last of the funds from the multitude of County Forest Preserve and Conservation District referenda that were passed over the preceding decade have been put to use acquiring important local properties, the pace of public sector land acquisition has understandably slowed. Coupled with the budgetary challenges in Springfield that, in the absence of a full year's state budget by and large prevent the Illinois Department of Natural Resources from growing or adding to its preserves, 2016 was, save for in Lake County, a noticeably slow year on the public land acquisition front. Though as any good conservation professional (or, in the case of yours truly, "professional amateur"...or maybe just "amateur"? "Immature"? Yeah. Definitely that last one) will tell you, quantity does not equal quality. Just besting last year's public sector numbers, 2016 saw 1,078.4 acres acquired or otherwise preserved across central and northern Illinois, from a small prairie that the previous landowner has lovingly and *expertly* restored over the last 11 years to an expansive farm that will be restored to a fully functional wetland community. Without further imposing upon my reader's valuable time, let us see what the year had to offer.

- **Champaign County Soil & Water Conservation District**

- 8 acres of prairie at the Barnhart Grove Prairie Restoration Project immediately south of the U. of I. Champaign-Urbana campus, acquired with the strong support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** (with a conservation easement over the same property being donated to the Illinois DNR). Barnhart Prairie, owned by the eponymous family, began being restored in 1987 as a private initiative of the family, with the support and assistance of **Heartland Pathways**. Over the next thirteen years the prairie area expanded, with the owner establishing a nonprofit to hold title to the growing site. By 2005, the prairie was of such high quality that 80 acres were enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system. A year prior to that, the District acquired an 8 acre parcel north of the main site and directly east of the parcel acquired this past year. The new parcel, acquired from the Barnhart family (as was the previously acquired property) is buffered on three sides by the prairie, and has itself long been the subject of highly successful restoration work. Three generations of the Barnhart family have now worked with the Soil & Water Conservation District to manage the privately and publicly owned

site. The prairie restoration was and is sourced entirely from local seed. Some of the grasses on the site now exceed 6' in height; it's a really impressive property made even more so by the obvious care that's been devoted to the land over almost 30 years.

- **Forest Preserve District of Cook County**

- A 1.5 acre residential property surrounded by the Tampier Wetland and Tampier Lakes Greenway Forest Preserves.
- 3.56 acres which creates a connection between the FPDCC's Powderhorn Lake Forest Preserve and the IDNR's William W. Powers State Recreation Area, further developing the Millennium Reserve in and around Calumet. I should note that both this parcel and the following two properties were all discussed in last year's letter. However, unknown to me at the time, the closing was substantially delayed, pushing them to 2016. For the sake of completeness, I'm thus reporting all three again this year. So don't double count if you go looking at last year's letter!
- 2.3 acres containing a house and attendant landscaping, with a creek running through the northeastern corner to expand the 626 acre Jens Jensen Preserve in northern Cook County.
- 23 acres containing a residential house and open fields in Barrington Hills, northwestern Cook County, connecting the 3,850 acre Spring Lake Preserve with the District's 397 acre Horizon Farm Preserve.

- **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**

- 2.2 mostly wooded acres with a small half-acre lake along Purnell Road as an addition to Blackwell Forest Preserve in west central DuPage County.
- 0.53 wooded acres as an addition to Crocket Creek Forest Preserve, in the northeast of the County, just north of I-290.
- A 0.78 acre homesite that squares off a boundary at Night Heron Marsh, in southwestern DuPage County.
- 24.2 wetland acres on the border of Wood Dale and Itasca, in the northeastern corner of the County. The property expands the previously 111 acre Salt Creek Marsh, which runs north to south in disconnected pieces of land along the eponymous creek. The District had been in negotiations to purchase the property, but the landowner instead graciously decided to donate the site.

- **Forest Preserve District of Kane County**

- 94.17 acres in central Kane County, south of IL-38 immediately west of the City of St. Charles. Mostly agricultural land with a farm complex in the middle of the site, the property is an addition to the 174.4 acre Mill Creek Greenway Forest Preserve located directly to the south.

- **Forest Preserve District of Will County**
 - A 0.11 acre driveway connecting Hammel Woods to the adjacent U.S. Route 52, coupled with 0.13 acre triangular piece of land immediately to the south, over which a bike trail will be constructed running from Hammel Woods in the east to U.S. Route 52.
 - 1.482 acres of woodland along the Wauponsee Glacial Trail from a tax sale.
- **Forest Preserves of Winnebago County**
 - 37.0 acres to be restored to prairie and forest along the eastern boundary of the Kishwaukee River Forest Preserve in southeastern Winnebago County. Acquired with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the majority of the land is farmland, except for woods along the river. The Forest Preserves will restore much of the property to mesic prairie, while adding several acres of trees to the woodland.
 - 1.3 acres in the northwest corner of the Rockford Rotary Forest Preserve, located immediately adjacent to the previously described Kishwaukee River Forest Preserve. A single family home lies on this wooded site which abuts the Kishwaukee River and connects the main body of the preserve with a 7 acre wooded area to the west that was previously disconnected from the main body of the preserve. The house will be demolished and the entire area restored to floodplain forest. A grant from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* helped to cover the cost of the non-developed portion of the property, with the Forest Preserves covering the value of the house.
- **Illinois Department of Natural Resources**
 - 70.06 acres of a wetland mitigation bank in central Rock Island County, gifted to the Department following the bank's completion.
 - 11.15 acres of vacated roadway right of way bisecting the 104.1 acre Wolf Road Prairie in western Cook County. ~80 acres of the site, ownership of which is divided between the DNR, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, and the nonprofit Save the Prairie Society is a remnant tallgrass prairie; the largest such remnant in the Chicago region. The vacated ROWs crisscrossed the entirety of the eastern half of the prairie (those in the western half of the prairie had been previously vacated by the Forest Preserve District), making the vacation of *great* import to the site's integrity. All in all, a very exciting project.
- **Illinois Nature Preserves Commission**
 - Powering through a half year budgetary roadblock, the INPC added nine new dedications/registrations to the system totaling 260.68 acres (68.09 acres of which had no prior form of protection). Six sites were expanded, alongside one new Nature Preserve and Land & Water reserve each. 25% of the newly protected properties by acreage were dedicated/registered by private individuals, 71% by 501(c)3 land trusts, and the remainder by a local government.
- **Lake County Forest Preserve District**
 - 337 acres of agricultural fields, wetlands, and a small manmade lake north of Ray Lake Forest Preserve in Wauconda, an acquisition and restoration supported by the *Illinois*

Clean Energy Community Foundation. The entire property is underlain by hydric soils and will be restored to a wetland and grassland community over the next five years. The property adds to the 3,367 acre District-owned Lakewood/Ray Lake macrosite to the south, creating a 3,700+ acre preserve, with water from the new property flowing south onto the existing Preserves. This acquisition incentivized and led to four additional projects on adjacent land, each of which also closed this year and are described below.

- 20.03 acres of wetland and open water wetland, with a forested ridge containing two residences in the northwest as an addition to Lakewood Forest Preserve in western Lake County. Surrounded by the Forest Preserve on three sides, the parcel lies adjacent to property that has been extensively restored by the District. The acquisition permits the District to both expand its restoration efforts and to manage almost the entire wetland complex.
 - 15.0 acres of agricultural fields and a small portion of a wetland along Gilmer Road as a second addition to Ray Lake Forest Preserve in western Lake County. Located along the southern boundary of the Preserve, the new parcel enables the expansion of a prairie restoration project underway to both the north and west.
 - 61.8 acres of agricultural fields and an accompanying farmstead on the northern border of Ray Lake Forest Preserve north and south of Erhart Road, in the third expansion of the site for the year. The property provides additional connectivity between the main body of the Preserve and the previously described 337 acre addition, facilitating and expanding the wetland and grassland restoration project. For those keeping track at home, this property further increases the Lakewood/Ray Lake Preserve macrosite to over 3,800 acres.
 - 29.4 acres of agricultural fields bisected by the channelized Squaw Creek. Lying directly east of the 61.8 acres described above, in the year's *fourth* expansion of the Ray Lake Forest Preserve. Squaring off the property owned by the District, this parcel in conjunction with its peer acquisition to the west provides a broad plain that is the natural extension of the large 337 acre addition, enabling a more comprehensive wetland/grassland restoration of the entire site.
 - 18.9 acres in a trail easement running along a creek directly north of Ethel's Woods Forest Preserve in north central Lake County. Traversing a wooded corridor, the easement will provide trail access connecting the preserve in the south to Route 173 in the north.
- **McHenry County Conservation District**
 - A 246.811 acre conservation easement in northern McHenry County, adjacent to the Alden Sedge Meadow Conservation Area. This donated easement lies within the boundaries of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. In addition to a ~40 acre oak woodland and a creek which flows through the property's southeast, the land is dominated by a commercial tree nursery and agricultural field, both of which will be converted to horse pasture, an arboretum, or restored prairie, savanna, or woodland within three years.

Natural Areas Restoration and Management

While not practical to detail all of the numerous restoration projects taking place around the state on both publicly and privately held land, there are some very notable and emblematic projects that stand out for their scale or for the unique landscapes in which they're operating.

- **Openlands** is nearing completion of its portion of the 202 acre Drummond Floodplain Project at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, located in the far northwest of the preserve just to the southwest of Jackson Creek. Funded through the O'Hare Modernization Mitigation Account, the project is focused on restoring and enhancing wetlands and wetland buffers in a diverse area including sedge meadow, wet prairie, wet dolomite prairie, and shallow marsh with some mesic prairie buffers. This rather extensive effort has involved significant removal of accumulated fill and the removal of drain tiles in the north, west, and east of the site. Begun in 2011, major infrastructural work was completed the following year, with most restoration work then accomplished in 2013 and 2014. The past two years have been devoted primarily to stewarding the site with a focus on invasive species control, planting of native flora, and maintenance of existing indigenous communities. The restoration has proven quite welcome for area birds, with Virginia Rail, King Rail, and an American Bittern all heard on the site.
- The **Lake County Forest Preserve District** and the **Forest Preserve District of Cook County** removed three early 20th century dams on the Des Plaines River (two in Lake, one in Cook). The Lake County dams were removed from MacArthur Woods and Captain Daniel Wright Woods Forest Preserves, both in the southern third of the County, while the Cook County dam was previously located off of Dempster Avenue in Des Plaines. With their removal, the Lake County portion of the river has now been completely cleared of such structures, while three remain along the Cook County portion. Their removal should, if past removal projects are a guide, significantly facilitate the mobility of aquatic invertebrates, mussels, and fish, both enhancing the river's biodiversity while simultaneously dramatically expanding their range (after all, there's a *lot* of river upstream from the three former structures!)
The three remaining dams will be removed as funding permits, with all of the projects being supported by the Illinois DNR. While DNR planned to support the recently completed projects, budget issues ultimately precluded this. The two Forest Preserve Districts were able to move ahead using internal funds, with the possibility of being partially reimbursed in the future as state funds become available.
- **Openlands** selectively cleared 132 acres at the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's Deer Grove West. First discussed in last year's letter, this is part of a larger \$3M+ restoration project taking in the whole of the 1,155 acre site.
- The **Illinois Department of Natural Resources** has resumed its restoration program for the [Alligator Gar](#), the state's largest indigenous fish. Growing to at least 8.5 feet long and weighing over 300 pounds, the fish was last confirmed in Illinois in 1966 and declared extinct in 1994. The program, which has been on hiatus for the last two years, aims to return the giant fish to the Illinois and Kaskaskia rivers and their surrounding environs.
- **Friends of the Chicago River** has completed a three year project to clear invasive flora from 78 acres owned by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. The \$750,000 project, funded by an anonymous donor, enabled Friends to work with the Forest Preserve to clear land at Skokie

Lagoons, Chipilly Woods, Watersmeet Woods, Wampum Lake Woods, and the Saq Quarries. The work benefited local populations of a variety of turtle species by providing new nesting areas, while also benefiting bats and ospreys through the construction of platforms for the latter and houses for the former.

- **The Conservation Foundation** has assembled a coalition of 12 public and private organizations including the Kane, DuPage, and Kendall Forest Preserve Districts, Barrington Area Conservation Trust, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, Conserve Lake County, Fermilab, and the park districts of Oswego and Park Valley to enhance and expand habitat opportunities for Monarch butterflies and associated pollinators along the Fox Valley Corridor from McHenry to Kendall Counties. Funded by a \$250K grant from the **National Fish and Wildlife Foundation**, TCF and its partners will spend two years beginning in 2017 producing, planting, and distributing milkweed and other pollinator friendly flora. Some organizations will focus on seed production, while others will use their land holdings to establish the habitat corridor. Many of the land trusts will supplement this work through their respective Conservation@Home programs, encouraging homeowners and businesses to add the pollinator friendly species to their own homes and in so doing complement the work being done on the larger public properties.
- Relatedly, the **Field Museum** has spent the last year to learn how to best support Monarch butterflies in urban areas, specifically focused on Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Austin, and Kansas City. In all four cities, including, most relevant to this letter, Chicago, the Museum identified potential habitat for the insects and strategies for increasing said habitat, largely through the planting of milkweed.
- **The Conservation Foundation** expanded its Conservation in Our Community program, working with the residents of eight municipalities in 2016 to improve resource use and management at the individual level.
- Thirteen bison were born at the **United States Forest Service's** Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie this past year, bringing the herd, which was introduced last fall, to 39. Three of the calves were born noticeably later than is typical, leading to speculation that they were conceived on site. Not to be outdone, **The Nature Conservancy's** Nachusa Grasslands in Ogle and Lee Counties saw the birth of 17 calves, bringing the herd to 89 animals (53 females, 36 males). The calves are quite healthy, with an average weight this past October of 350 lbs while the largest came in at 420 lbs.
- **The Nature Conservancy** (in conjunction with U. of I. and ISU, and funded by the **Natural Resource Conservation Service**) has completed a three year project with the City of Bloomington that sought to and succeeded in reducing nutrient runoff into the two reservoirs that serve as the city's source of drinking water. Three wetlands were constructed over the past year, adding to four others on both private and public lands that were built in 2014 and 2015. The wetlands have reduced the nitrate runoff by 50-60% between the water's entrance into the new systems and its exit on the way to the reservoirs.
- **ParkLands Foundation** began new restoration projects this year at its Merwin and Mohr preserves in northern McLean County. Funded by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, the year and a half long project will focus on removing invasive flora while enhancing the native variety.

Policy & Advocacy

While on-the-ground work gets a great deal of attention, much of what the conservation community does is made possible (or defended) through invaluable policy and advocacy work at all levels of government and with local communities. Over the last twelve months, these efforts have been particularly prominent at some of the state's most prominent sites.

- Having clearly spent too much time binging on *Game of Thrones* and in so doing come to believe the veracity of Pyke's tagline that what is dead can never die, the Illinois and Indiana Departments of Transportation discovered that there's a reason the genre is called fantasy when an attempt to revive the deceased Illiana tollway (the de facto though not formal cancellation of which was one of last year's top three projects) met an ignominious end. In a lawsuit brought by **Openlands**, the **Midewin Heritage Association**, and the **Sierra Club**, and argued by the **Environmental Law and Policy Center**, the plaintiffs successfully convinced the court to cancel the Illiana's Tier 2 Environmental Impact Statement. Arguing that the EIS was unjustifiably weighted in favor of the two DOT's desired outcome, the plaintiffs made the case that the EIS be rendered "invalid". Any future EIS review must be developed from scratch, using acceptable data. This work has been and continues to be supported by the **Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation**.
Complementing the court's decision, 20 organizations, led by **Openlands** composed and delivered to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning a detailed four page letter striking down both the road's rationale and its financial viability. The **Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** is supporting **Openlands** in efforts to identify and develop alternative transportation opportunities that both meet the needs of the area's growing communities while simultaneously protecting this national treasure.
- **Openlands** has begun a fundraising campaign for the continued growth and development of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in a program supported by the **Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation**.
- The **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** has formally established the Kankakee National Wildlife and Fish Refuge through the acceptance of a 66.1 acre tract from **Friends of the Kankakee** (all originally purchased with assistance from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**). The announcement of the Refuge's incipient creation was one of last year's Top 3 Most Awesome Projects, and its formal creation this past spring brought to fruition a project that slowly but consistently developed over more than twenty years.

Top 3 Most Awesome Projects

This year's top projects are the most diverse ever, ranging from the public sector to the private; from the digital to the physical. They are unified by the diverse coalitions and farsighted vision of the women and men who conceived, supported, and shepherded them through to completion.

- The **Prairie State Conservation Coalition**, with the very generous support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and the **Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** has created a geodatabase of *all* publicly and privately protected fee and easement properties in Illinois (sans

CREP easements and a handful of NRCS easements) held by conservation organizations, in one of the year's more important planning projects. The database also includes nearly all municipal parks in the state. Added to this, they developed and have made freely available [I-View](#), a web app that in turn makes available the complete protected lands database alongside other geographic datasets such as COAs, INAI sites, trails, and Natural Division boundaries.

- The database, which can be downloaded in the I-View app for use offline with GIS software or in Google Earth, is the most complete product of its kind in the nation, providing accuracy within at *least* 3 meters for the majority of the 10,000+ sites documented. It's designed to simultaneously facilitate and promote cross-organizational cooperation in developing larger, more integrated conservation macrosites.
 - All of the sites described in this letter can be found on the app, so take a look. After all, if a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, then it'll save you having to read yet more of my blather!
 - In addition to providing access to the protected lands database and other useful environmental (and political) boundaries, the web app provides users with a moderate-level mapping ability, enabling them to add their own points, lines, polygons, and text to create custom map products.
 - This is a somewhat unusual product, so I realized there might be value in using this space to answer some questions:
 - **Questioner:** "Hey, weren't you the principal individual responsible for building both the database and the web app?"
 - **Dave:** "Not exactly the kind of question I was expecting, but yeah. What's your point?"
 - **Questioner:** "Don't you think you're a bit biased then? I mean, seriously, including your own project in the list of awesome projects of the year? Isn't that a little self-aggrandizing?"
 - **Dave:** "Well, I see what you're saying, but...well, you see..."
 - **Questioner:** "Admit it. This is a conflict of interest, and you know it."
 - **Dave:** "... .. Shut up."
 - **Questioner:** "Oh, now that is an eloquent and nuanced riposte there. Well done."
 - **Dave:** "... .."
- The **United States Forest Service** has launched a [\\$6.7M project](#) to restore ~1,800 acres in the western segment of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (adjacent to ~2,200 acres restored over the last five years by both **The Wetlands Initiative** as discussed in last year's letter, and by the USFS), taking the prize for the year's most impressive restoration or management project - a position Midewin has now held for two years running. The initiative is being led by the **National Forest Foundation**, which will raise \$2M for the project over the next five years, and is strongly supported by the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** and by the **Grand Victoria Foundation**, each of which has committed \$1M to the project in challenge grants. This means that those commitments will only enter into force once the National Forest Foundation raises the \$2M it has promised to the project, with the Forest Service then providing the final \$2.7M. The restoration project will demolish ~18 of the ~373 remaining WWII-era munitions bunkers scattered across the property and will also remove drain tiles and other infrastructure including roads, rail lines, and drainage structures throughout the project area, and will expand traditional restoration efforts including the extirpation of invasive species and the introduction of controlled burning. Of special note, a portion of the restoration effort will focus on a dolomite

prairie located at the western edge of the site. A *very* rare ecosystem, dolomite prairies make tallgrass prairies look prolific by comparison, making the restoration of this small area of rather substantial significance.

- The **Land Conservancy of Will County** and **The Conservation Foundation** have announced their impending merger in the year's most important policy project, bringing together TCF's scale and expertise with LCWC's local knowledge and experience. The tie up is the first between Illinois land trusts since the Fox Valley Land Foundation merged with TCF in 2007. The merging of two land trusts might seem an odd project to elevate to the status of one of the most impressive or important projects of the year, but it's anything but. In fact, it's arguably the most important of the three. In an era of tightened purse strings and a multitude of challenges, combining organizations that share a similar focus (geographically and programmatically) can simultaneously reduce redundancy and provide significant economies of scale. In this respect, the nonprofit sector is no different than its for-profit cousin! Through their merger, LCWC and TCF will also combine their skills and donor bases, reduce competition for financial resources, and enhance both the depth and breadth of the services they offer to their communities. As land trusts either mature, complete their primary purpose, or contend with shifting economic headwinds, LCWC and TCF provide a salient example of the many benefits to combining forces. They demonstrate in a very real and tangible way that the whole can indeed be significantly greater than the sum of its parts.

Land Trusts You Should Know About...but Probably Don't

Illinois, in addition to having a surfeit of Governors who in their quest to improve the criminal justice system routinely take it upon themselves to test the quality of federal prison cells by nobly living in them for years on end, is also home to dozens of land trusts accomplishing great work throughout the state. Many of those reading this letter have had the pleasure of working with the largest of these groups on some of the most significant land protection and restoration projects of the last half century. Far fewer will have had the privilege of getting to know some of the local land trusts that have ably served their local communities for decades. I'd like to thus introduce my readers to two great organizations, both of which call southern Illinois home.

Green Earth, Inc.

Founded in 1974, Green Earth Inc. has ever since successfully pursued a singular mission; to provide public access to natural areas for the residents of and visitors to Carbondale. Acquiring their first property in 1976, in the intervening four decades Green Earth has acquired five additional sites that total 248 acres all within or immediately adjacent to the city. Their emphasis on public access has led to the construction of nine miles of hiking trails that traverse woodlands, wetlands, prairie, and riparian corridors. And these properties aren't concentrated in a single area; rather, they're located throughout Carbondale, ensuring that a large portion of the city's residents can reach at least one site within no more than a ten minute walk. The activities that Green Earth has built into its sites is itself worthy of mention. Consistent with their focus on connecting the city's residents with the natural world, Green Earth's various properties contain a plethora of activities, including self-guided interpretive trails (and a Children's Exploration Trail to help the newest generations grow into the hiking experience!), a tree ID trail, and two prairie demonstration gardens.

One of Green Earth's more notable strengths has little to do (directly at least) with its preserves, and that is its *people*. Operating with a single halftime employee and a dozen board members, Green Earth's volunteers have put in tens of thousands of hours of volunteer time over the past decade, maintaining trails, restoring and managing habitat, and growing the organization. This dedication has been facilitated by support from organizations ranging from the Illinois DNR to the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, all of which recognize the efficiency and skill with which the organization serves the citizens of Carbondale. In short, Green Earth combines a community focus with community engagement and partnership that few can match, and in so doing is an example to all who work to conserve, restore, and make available to the public Illinois' natural heritage.

St. Clair County Greenspace Foundation

The St. Clair County Greenspace Foundation has for over 25 years protected and restored the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River east of East St. Louis. Working in a heavily urbanized area along I-157, the all-volunteer organization has acquired 66 acres of forested bluffs that the group, with the support of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, has expertly restored and stewarded (and which they continue to add to). The Foundation really exemplifies the impact that small organizations can have on their communities. Small though their properties may be, they provide an easily accessible year-round place of respite and recreation.

St. Clair Greenspace doesn't simply acquire land and call it a day. In addition to restoring and caring for its property, the Foundation works very closely with the local community and its civic organizations, from which they draw many of their volunteers. As it begins its second quarter century, the Foundation is continuing the steady extirpation of invasive species on its property while simultaneously looking to expand upon its work with the area's local schools by creating an outdoor classroom in coordination with an elementary school adjoining the Foundation's largest property. Through its efforts the St. Clair County Greenspace Foundation reminds all who know it of the essential human element that connects people with nature and in so doing makes all conservation work possible.

2015 Revisited

As the readers of this letter likely know, fate has a tendency to lay low the proud. Despite my best attempts to escape its Grecian shackles, I have yet to prove an exception; after confidently hitting the Send button on last year's letter, I learned within 24 hours that I had missed not one, but two land acquisitions (with many more soon following). I therefore both invite and importune my readers to continue on to learn about some very interesting projects from 2015 that were unforgivably absent from last year's letter.

- **Champaign County Forest Preserve District**
 - 28 wooded acres along the Salt Fork of the Vermilion River, adjacent to a previously acquired 7-acre tract of virgin timber. Acquired with the strong support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the property will remain in a naturalized condition, with a loop trail running through the site.

- **Citizens for Conservation**
 - 4.5 wetland acres finalized in the last week of 2015 but not recorded (and thus brought to my attention) until this past January, this property lies along Flint Creek and connects 9.6 acres acquired earlier in 2015 to the main body of the 134 acre (now 140 acre) site.
 - 0.56 acres in a conservation easement over a wetland/detention basin in the northeast corner of Flint Creek. Part of another deal finalized in late 2015 and announced in early 2016.
 - 3.36 acres of wetland and woodland along the northeastern extent of Flint Creek, with the eponymous waterway flowing through the property. The second part of the transaction described in the previous bullet point, this property contains a large number of youngish oaks (~50 years old) and is a key ecological piece of the larger preserve; it's so pivotal that CFC worked towards its acquisition for *32 years*.
- **Ducks Unlimited**
 - 470.5 acres of mostly open water wetlands along the northeast corner of the Sanganois State Fish and Wildlife Refuge in Mason County. The property will eventually be deeded to Illinois Audubon Society to permanently care for, while additional property further to the west will be deeded to the IDNR; an approach that DU has been pursuing for years at this site, and that has resulted in expansions all along its northern and western extents. An additional 258 acres acquired as part of this acquisition were traded to an adjacent landowner in 2016 for the property described earlier in the "Private Sector Land Conservation" section of this letter.
- **Forest Preserve District of Will County**
 - A few parcels slipped through the cracks at the FPDWC as they closed just as the year was ending. The District acquired 34.81 acres at the south end of Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve. A wooded area with scattered wetlands along the Des Plaines River, the property is also adjacent to a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve of the same name.
 - 1.46 acres of trail corridor along the railroad tracks along the west end of the small Wolf Creek Preserve.
- **Friends of the Kankakee**
 - 8.18 acres in Iroquois County acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. While finalizing details of the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last year, Friends *also* continued its decades-long work of adding *to* that future Refuge, with two separate acquisitions that brought the total area of the site to an impressive 276.05 acres.
- **Land Conservancy of Will County**
 - A 0.44 acre wooded residential lot in northeastern Will County, east of the Thorn Grove Forest Preserve.

- **Natural Land Institute**
 - 60.86 acres (62.68 gross acres) in far northeastern Ogle County, at the intersection of McGregor and Weldon Roads. When composing last year's letter I thought that the property had yet to close, but discovered early this year to my chagrin that it had in fact closed in early September. Predominantly in agricultural production with large open areas bisecting the fields, the property was donated by four brothers who wanted to preserve the land in perpetuity. NLI's long history of work in and with local communities in northwestern Illinois made it both the ideal and natural place for the family to turn, and the entire conservation community thus benefits from that strong focus.

Changes at the Top

2016 was a year of transition, with a number of land trusts making changes to their leadership teams or staffing structures over the past twelve months, particularly in central and southern Illinois.

- **Dr. Deanna Glosser**, former head of the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board and a founding board member of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition has added to her already sterling resume by assuming the role of Executive Director of the **Land Conservation Foundation**, taking over for Terre Ziegler, who has retired to the sunny climes of Florida after successfully leading LCF as it became one of the premier land trusts of east central Illinois.
- **Dr. James Herkert**, whose list of notable accomplishments is longer than my entire resume, and who most recently served as the Director of the Office of Resource Conservation at the Illinois DNR has taken the reins at the **Illinois Audubon Society**, following long time Executive Director Tom Clay's move to northern Wisconsin to guide the Door County Land Trust. Tom is and will continue to be missed.
- The inestimable **Erik Schenck** has left **Ducks Unlimited**, with which his position was eliminated this past year. DU projects in the state are now being overseen by representatives in IA, WI, and IN.
- **Ed Stevenson** is serving as the *Acting* Executive Director of the **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**.
- **Sarah Surroz** is the new Executive Director at **Conserve Lake County** where she has long worked with distinction, replacing the departed Dave Neu.
- **Mary Vandevord** has taken on the CEO role at **Heartlands Conservancy** after serving ably as the organization's COO, succeeding Dave Eustis who served in the role for sixteen years, turning Heartlands' into the land trust powerhouse of southwestern Illinois.