



*Co-partners of the Volunteer Stewardship Network*

## **Volunteer Stewardship Network Annual Report**

**July 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015**

Across the state, thousands of volunteers from all walks of life regularly roll up their sleeves to help clear out invasive species, collect and sow native plant seeds, assist with prescribed fire and monitor populations of indigenous plants and animals. These individuals are part of the Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN), a loose network of volunteers affiliated with public and private organizations helping to bring health back to our native lands and waters.

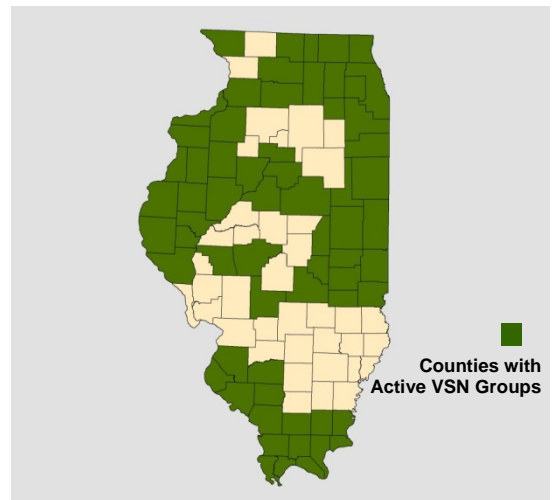
The VSN was formed in 1983 by The Nature Conservancy and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. Through this partnership, we continue to provide leadership and support for the Volunteer Stewardship Network with a goal to support, promote and expand the role of volunteers working to protect and manage natural areas in Illinois. For a current listing of the organizations and groups that are part of the VSN, see Appendix A.

### The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy is the largest non-profit conservation organization in the world with a mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. The Nature Conservancy's Illinois Chapter began in 1957 with a group of citizens who campaigned to save 47.5 acres of Ingleside's Volo Bog. Volo bog is now a registered National Natural Landmark, a dedicated Nature Preserve and Illinois' only remaining open-water quaking bog. Over 58 years, we have worked with partners to protect and restore 86,000 acres spanning 100+ sites in Illinois' seven major ecoregions.

### Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission is a government appointed commission within the Illinois Department of Natural Resources that protects land by registering it as dedicated Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves. Since January 2015, there are 383 Nature Preserves totaling 57,729 acres and 179 Land and Water Reserves totaling 49,838 acres.



## New organizations and groups in the Network

Below is a listing of organizations and groups that joined the Network this past year.

### [Lincoln Park Conservancy](#)

The Lincoln Park Conservancy offers a variety of volunteer programs at the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool, Lincoln Park Conservatory and Gardens, and North Pond Nature Sanctuary. These sites are located in Lincoln Park near Fullerton Parkway and Stockton Drive.

### [Friends of Langham Island](#)

Langham Island, one of the most unique sites to the State of Illinois coming in at just over 20 acres, is located in the middle of the Kankakee River to the West of Bourbonnais, IL. The island is a designated Illinois Nature Preserve in region 3. The habitat on the island can be divided into an unique dolomite bedrock upland with a savanna/mesic forest mix and an alluvial floodplain forest. Langham Island is home to many rare native wildflowers including the Kankakee Mallow (*Illiama Remota*) which occurs naturally only here anywhere in the world! The Friends of Langham Island group is dedicated to restoring the island ecosystem by removing invasive pressure and maintaining a consistent fire regime.

### [Forest Preserves of Winnebago County](#)

Encompassing 10,300 acres, 42 preserves, four rivers, 100 miles of hiking trails and four campgrounds, the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County provide endless opportunities. Since 1922, these areas have been dedicated to the preservation of forests and wildlife for recreation and education.

### [Missionary Oblates Woods Nature Preserve](#)

This privately owned 15 acre nature preserve is located in Madison County adjacent to the 400 acre John M. Olin and Mississippi Sanctuary Nature Preserve complex owned by The Nature Institute.

## Highlights

### **New VSN Webpages Now Live!**

In March, the VSN launched new webpages at [www.nature.org/volunteerIL](http://www.nature.org/volunteerIL). This two year project involved the creation of training videos and the collection of photos and information on all the stewardship groups within the Network. These new pages will provide more public awareness of volunteer stewardship activities and opportunities across the state and will provide a space for volunteers to get more information on stewardship training and networking opportunities.

### **Wild Things Conference 2015 a Huge Success**

The sixth biennial Wild Things Conference was held on Saturday, January 31, 2015 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. This conference was possible through the planning and contributions of many volunteers and staff representing various organizations across the Chicago region. The Nature Conservancy was a sponsor and provided assistance with planning.

Stats and information from the day:

- 1,624 registrants (largest prior attendance was 1,100)
- 70 volunteers, 169 presenters, 37 exhibitors, and 10 posters
- [Post conference website](#)
- [Wild Things: People Make the Difference](#)

Through a grant from the Alfred Bersted Foundation, the VSN also provided 29 scholarships which allowed volunteers and staff the opportunity to attend the conference. These individuals represented nine different organizations including: DeKalb County Forest Preserve District, Downer's Grove Park District, Land Conservancy of McHenry County, McHenry County Conservation District, The Morton Arboretum, Fermilab Natural Areas, Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, Forest Preserve District of Kane County and Illinois Department of Natural Resources (Friends of Volo Bog & Moraine Hills State Park).

### **“Volunteer for Nature” Feather Banners**



Look for these playful feather banners posted at natural areas during stewardship workdays and events throughout the year in the Chicago region. As part of an effort to visually create awareness of volunteer opportunities on the land, the Conservancy worked with a local artist to produce a series of banners to capture some of the more rare species that live in our prairies, wetlands and woodlands. The original banners created for natural areas along the lakeshore featured images of bird feathers to symbolize these places as important migratory bird pathways. Each banner is customized at the bottom with the logos of the Conservancy, the local landowner, and

the volunteer group. These banners were made possible through the generous funding from the Lowes Charitable and Educational Foundation and the Alfred Bersted Foundation. Banners were provided to the Chicago Park District, Friends of Illinois Beach, Chiwaukee Prairie Preservation Fund and VSN groups affiliated with the Forest Preserves of Cook County and several other organizations in McHenry, DuPage, Kane and DeKalb counties.



### **Gatherings Newsletter**

In January, the VSN re-launched the *Gatherings Newsletter*, an online newsletter published bi-monthly by The Nature Conservancy to inform the stewardship community of new resources, upcoming events, workshops and news from across the state. For more information about the newsletter and how to subscribe, [visit our website](#).

### **Herbicide Licensing Training**

Each year, the VSN partners with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County to host training and testing workshops to make it easier for volunteers and staff from across the

Chicago region to receive their license to apply herbicide on public land. A total of 84 people representing 16 organizations attended the workshops held in November 2014.

### **Montrose Beach Dunes Volunteer Sign**

The Nature Conservancy worked in partnership with the Chicago Park District and the Montrose Beach Dunes volunteers to create and install a bilingual sign that illustrates how volunteers contribute to the restoration at the dunes and information on how to get involved.



### **Volunteer Training Assessment Survey**

In the winter of 2015, The Nature Conservancy in partnership with The Morton Arboretum conducted two surveys that were distributed to stewardship volunteers and natural area practitioners who work with volunteers across Illinois. We had an overwhelming response from 593 volunteers and 89 natural area practitioners! [View the survey results](#). This report was shared widely with conservation organizations and agencies across the state. It will provide a baseline of data that will inform and hopefully inspire collaboration to make training easier and more accessible to volunteers who are engaging people in ecological restoration of our native lands and waters. A few themes that rose to the top included: more field and network experiences, varied training formats such as online training options, and access to tools and training to help measure the impact of restoration.

### **Fire Training Scholarships**

Through a grant from the Alfred Bersted Foundation, the VSN provided scholarships for two volunteers to attend the Prescribed Fire Workshop held at the McHenry County Conservation District in March 2015.

### **VSN Stewardship Fund**

The VSN Stewardship Fund is a program that helps to build the capacity of local volunteer groups at the grassroots level within the Network. The Fund was originally created to address the budget shortfalls of landowning organizations and to encourage them to manage their natural areas through volunteer stewardship. Today, the program continues to fill the gaps of these small budgets and now also serves as an incubator for new projects that can be funded and shared widely throughout the state. Past support through this program has gone towards the purchase of tools, herbicide, and native plants as well as helping to pay for items such as newsletters, websites, and other educational materials.

This past year, the VSN awarded 42 volunteer groups (see list below) funds for the purchase of tools, herbicide, and outreach materials. Collectively these groups work on 545

natural areas in 30 counties and over the past year have engaged 15,812 volunteers that have contributed more than 83,109.13 volunteer hours.

**Organizations/Groups awarded:** Allerton Allies; Barrington Area Conservation Trust; Bill Jarvis Bird Sanctuary; Boone County Conservation District; Champaign County Forest Preserve District; CLIFFTOP; The Conservation Foundation; Des Plaines River Valley Restoration Project; Downers Grove Park District; Dundee Township Park District; Embarras Volunteer Stewards; Fermilab Natural Areas; Forest Preserve District of Kane County; Forest Preserve District of Will County; Forest Preserves of Winnebago County; Friends of Indian Boundary Prairies; Friends of Pyramid State Park; Friends of Sangamon Valley, Friends of the Illinois River; Green Earth, Inc.; Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation; Jubilee Prairie Dawgs; Land Conservancy of McHenry County; Libertyville Township (Conserve Lake County); Long Grove Park District; Macon County Conservation District; McHenry County Natural Area Volunteers; McHenry County Conservation District; Meredosia Hill Prairie; Montgomery County Natural Area Guardians; The Morton Arboretum; Natural Land Institute; North Park Village Nature Center; Openlands; Peoria Wilds; ParkLands Foundation; Plants of Concern Rare Plant Monitoring Program; Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards; Salt Lick Point Committee; Santa Fe Prairie Volunteers; Shoal Creek Volunteers; Sugar Grove Nature Center-Funks Grove.

**Below is just a sample of some of the organizations and items that were funded through the VSN Stewardship Fund this past year.**

### **Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus or Prairie (CLIFFTOP)**

CLIFFTOP's mission is to promote the conservation, preservation and protection of the Mississippi River bluffs corridor in Monroe, Randolph and St. Clair Counties. In addition to working with county, state, federal and non-governmental agencies, CLIFFTOP also co-owns and manages the 465-acre White Rock Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve in

Monroe County, the 115-acre Mill Creek Natural Area in Randolph County and the 535-acre Paul Wightman Nature Preserve in Monroe County. Volunteers that get involved with CLIFFTOP can expect to help with prescribed burns, brush clearing, trail maintenance, control of invasive plant populations, and, with special permits, collecting seed for and restoring native plant



**Volunteer Fire Crew © Pen & Carl Daubach**

populations. Photography, species monitoring, and public outreach are

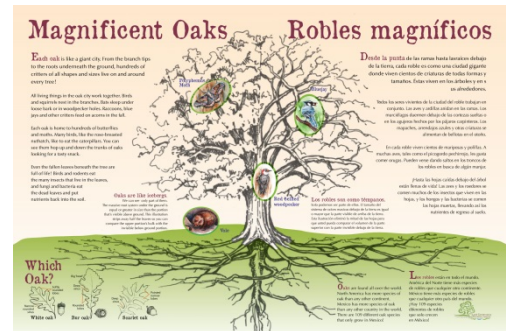
also ways that people can get involved with CLIFFTOP. Over the past few years, the VSN has supported CLIFFTOP, specifically provided prescribed fire tools and safety gear. This past year, the VSN awarded fire rakes and backpack sprayers to build up their cache of tools in preparation for a 400-acre prescribed burn of a hill prairie and upland forest.

## Natural Land Institute

Since 1958, the Natural Land Institute has helped to preserve and restore more than 16,000 acres of natural land in northern Illinois in an effort to create an enduring legacy of natural land for people, plants and wildlife. Currently, Natural Land Institute is working on building their capacity to steward all of these lands. Volunteer work crews play a large role at several sites managed by the group. The VSN was able to provide Natural Land Institute with two new brushcutting saws so that they could significantly increase their efficiency in controlling woody invasive species such as bush honeysuckle and buckthorn. The clearing saws will also be used to cut herbaceous invasive species in areas where larger machinery would not be reasonable to use, or where sensitive native species may be impacted by herbicides. With the addition of the saws, stewardship efforts can now be multiplied and morale will be lifted as greater areas will be able to be cleared of invasive species in less time.

## The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

Since 1991, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County has helped protect over 1,900 acres of McHenry County's prairies, wetlands and woodlands by engaging volunteers and working with private landowners, communities and other partners. They oversee management of 17 natural areas and many of those places have pockets of remnant ecosystems in jeopardy of being lost to invasive species including Yonder Prairie and Westwood Nature Preserve which are a conjoined 100 acre Nature Preserve and Buffer. With the hiring of a land stewardship specialist over a year ago, they have more than doubled the amount of volunteers, and have greatly expanded the amount and types of volunteer workdays. This past year, through a grant from the Alfred Bersted Foundation, the VSN has provided funding to help purchase gloves, seed collection bags, herbicide and sprayers, loppers, a chainsaw, and a



water pump and hose for prescribed fires. These additional tools will greatly enhance their volunteer restoration efforts and ensure the safety and efficiency of their volunteers, which are the heart of their organization.

The Land Conservancy of McHenry County also created three

bilingual, interpretive signs for the newly restored Harvard Gateway Park near Crosby Elementary School where 50 percent of students are either Hispanic, low-income, or both. The signs provide interpretive information on natural elements of the site, why restoration is important and historical connections to the community. They were unveiled at a grand opening celebration at the site in June 2015. Volunteers have spent countless hours clearing out buckthorn and bringing the light back to this oak savanna. Through a grant from the Alfred Bersted Foundation, the VSN was able to provide stewardship tools for



restoration and assisted with the translation and production of the bi-lingual signs. Funding will also provide supplies and resources for busing students to and from the park.

### **Openlands Lakeshore Preserve**

Located just 25 miles north of Chicago, the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve is one of the last remaining ravine and bluff ecosystems in the metropolitan region. Environmentally rich areas have been carefully restored, and an innovative interpretive plan enables visitors to experience more than a mile of Lake Michigan shoreline and extraordinary ravine habitat in a completely unique way. In 2013, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission designated the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve as an Illinois Nature Preserve. Openlands has been working on developing and implementing a comprehensive stewardship plan for the preserve. Existing and future opportunities for volunteers include invasive plant control, beach cleanups, biological monitoring, data collection, and educational outreach. The preserve is envisioned to be a “learning landscape” in which volunteers gain a deeper understanding of the lakefront ecosystem while contributing to a greater regional base of knowledge. Through their award from the VSN, the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve has been equipped with new supplies to support their stewardship program including: loppers, gloves, pruners, clipboards, buckets, and seed drying racks.

### **Plants of Concern**

Plants of Concern (POC), launched in 2001, is a rare plant monitoring program designed to gather standardized, regional monitoring data over time to learn population trends in relation to management practices. The program is a collaboration of trained volunteer



**Grass Pink Orchid (*Calopogon tuberosus*) © Karen Tharp**

monitors working together with land managers and scientists. The data collected provide land managers with information that helps them set management goals for species within a community context and evaluate management practices. This long-term project is part of the Chicago Wilderness Biodiversity Recovery Plan goal to research, protect and recover the region's rare plants. From the beginning, volunteers have played a crucial role, collecting and submitting data about rare species throughout the region. Since the inception of Plants of Concern, over 800 volunteers have monitored 288 species (of which 50 percent are endangered or threatened), monitored over 1,170 populations, monitored 66 percent of the endangered and threatened plant populations known from six northeastern Illinois counties, monitored plants in eight counties in northeastern Illinois (Cook, DuPage, Lake, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, McHenry, and Will), monitored plants in northwest Indiana and four counties in southeast Wisconsin, and coordinated with 112 landowners. This past year, the VSN provided POC with funding to help cover the costs of training volunteers and travel expenses for the POC coordinator to meet volunteers at monitoring sites across the region.

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# Appendix A

## Volunteer Stewardship Network

### List of organizations and groups

As of June 2015 – listed by region

#### Northeastern Region

Alliance for the Great Lakes

- Adopt-a-Beach Program

BackYard Nature Center

- Skokie Lagoons

Barrington Area Conservation Trust

Cary Park District

- Cary Hillside Prairie
- Old Watertower Prairie
- Picnic Grove
- Sands Main Street Prairie
- Prairie Hill Nature Preserve

Chicago Park District

- Bill Jarvis Migratory Bird Sanctuary
- Burnham Nature Sanctuary
- Hegewisch Marsh
- Jackson Park – Bobolink Meadow
- Jackson Park - Wooded Island
- Lincoln Park
- Loyola Beach Dunes
- Montrose Beach Dunes
- Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary
- North Park Village Nature Center
- Rainbow Beach Dunes
- South Shore Cultural Center
- Van Vlissingen “Marian Byrnes Natural Area”
- Washington Park

Chiwaukee Prairie Preservation Fund, Inc. (Wisconsin)

Citizens for Conservation

City of Elgin

- Friends of Trout Park
- Hawthorne Hill Nature Center

Conserve Lake County

Crystal Lake Park District

- Wingate Prairie Nature Preserve
- Sternes Fen
- Butternut Nature Preserve

Downers Grove Park District

- Restore, Educate, and Preserve “REAP” Volunteers

Dundee Township Park District

- Dixie Briggs Fromm Nature Preserve

Fermilab Natural Areas

Forest Preserve District of Cook County

- Bartel Grassland Volunteers



- Calumet Stewardship Initiative
  - Beaubien Woods Volunteers
  - Friends of Dan Ryan Woods
  - Eggers Woods
  - Powderhorn Prairie Volunteers
- Deer Grove Natural Area Volunteers
- Des Plaines River Valley Restoration Project
- Friends of the Bluff Spring Fen
- Friends of Busse Woods
- Kloempken Prairie
- North Branch Restoration Project
- Orland Grassland Volunteers
- Palos Restoration Project
- Poplar Creek Prairie Stewards
- Save the Prairie Society – Wolf Road Prairie Nature Preserve
- Skokie Lagoons
- Spring Creek Stewards

Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

Forest Preserve District of Kane County

Forest Preserve District of Will County

- Prairie People Volunteers

Friends of the Chicago River

Friends of the Forest Preserves

Friends of Illinois Beach

Friends of Langham Island

Friends of Moraine Hills State Park

Friends of Volo Bog

Friends of the Parks

- Dunning-Read Conservation Area

Habitat 2030

Hawthorne Hill Nature Center

I & M Canal Natural Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority

- Santa Fe Prairie Volunteers

Indian Creek Watershed Project, Inc.

Joliet Junior College Natural Areas

Kendall County Forest Preserve District

Lake Bluff Open Lands Association

Land Conservancy of McHenry County

Lake County Forest Preserve District

Lincoln Park Conservancy

Long Grove Park District

- Reed-Turner Woodlands Nature Preserve

McHenry County Conservation District

Mettawa Open Lands Association

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

The Morton Arboretum

The Nature Conservancy

- Chiwaukee Prairie (Wisconsin)
- Friends of Indian Boundary Prairies (Illinois)
- Kankakee Sands (Illinois)

Oakton Community College

- Kloempken Prairie

Openlands

- Lakeshore Preserve
- Park District of Highland Park  
 Skokie Park District
- Emily Oaks Nature Center
- St. Charles Park District
- Hickory Knolls Natural Area
  - Norris Woods Nature Preserve
  - Ferson Creek Fen Nature Preserve
  - Persimmon Woods
- Village of Itasca
- Springbrook Nature Center
- The Village of Lake in the Hills
- Lake in the Hills Fen Nature Preserve
- West Chicago Prairie Stewardship Group  
 Zion Park District
- Hosah Prairie

### **Northwestern Region**

- Boone County Conservation District  
 DeKalb County Forest Preserve District  
 Forest Preserves of Winnebago County  
 Henry County Natural Area Guardians  
 Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation  
 The Nature Conservancy
- Nachusa Grasslands Preserve
- Natural Land Institute  
 River Bend Wildland Trust  
 Whiteside County Natural Area Guardians

### **Central Region**

- Allerton Allies  
 Champaign County Forest Preserve District  
 Coon Hill Prairie Natural Heritage Landmark  
 Embarras Volunteer Stewards  
 Friends of Rocky Glen  
 Friends of Sangamon Valley  
 Friends of the Illinois River  
 Grand Prairie Friends  
 Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve  
 Jubilee Prairie Dawgs  
 Macon County Conservation District
- Sangamon Valley Volunteers
- Meredosia Hill Prairie Nature Preserve  
 The Nature Conservancy
- Emiquon Preserve
  - Spunky Bottoms Preserve
- Oak Bluff Savanna Nature Preserve  
 ParkLands Foundation  
 Peoria Park District
- Peoria Wilds
- Prairie Land Conservancy  
 Springdale Cemetery Prairie Natural Heritage Landmark  
 St. Mary's Cemetery Prairie Natural Heritage Landmark

Sugar Grove Nature Center

- Funks Grove Nature Preserve

Urbana Park District

Weston Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve

### **Southern Region**

Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus or Prairie (CLIFFTOP)

Friends of the Cache River Watershed

Friends of Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge

Friends of Giant City State Park

Friends of Pyramid State Park

Friends of the Shawnee National Forest

Friends of Stemler Nature Preserve

Green Earth, Inc.

Missionary Oblates Woods Nature Preserve

Montgomery County Natural Area Guardians

Salt Lick Point Committee

Shoal Creek Volunteers

Washington County Volunteers

### **Citizen Science Monitoring Programs**

Plants of Concern Rare Plant Monitoring Program

Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network

Calling Frog and Toad Survey

Dragonfly Monitoring Network