



*2017 - Year in Review  
Annual Report of  
Land Conservation Achievements in Illinois*

Written by David Holman

*The author thanks PSCC for their ongoing encouragement and support in the writing of this annual report. While the work and partnership of PSCC greatly contributes to the foundation of this writing, please note that the facts, figures, opinions, and general musings in this report are that of the author, and not of PSCC.*



## About Prairie State Conservation Coalition

Prairie State Conservation Coalition is a statewide, not-for-profit association that works to strengthen the effectiveness of conservation land trusts in Illinois. Conservation land trusts, such as local land conservancies, are also not-for-profit organizations seeking to improve the quality of life in their communities. Collectively, these organizations have helped protect more than 200,000 acres of open space in Illinois.

PSCC provides continuing education and training for conservation land trusts and advocates for strong statewide policies that benefit land conservation.

Find out more at [prairiestateconservation.org](http://prairiestateconservation.org).

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### Author bio

David Holman, the author of this report, is an independent conservation professional who works closely with the Prairie State Conservation Coalition and the individual land trust members of PSCC, as well as local, state, and federal agencies devoted to conservation. He specializes in Geographic Information Systems mapping, organizational efficiency, authoring Baseline and Current Conditions reports, irrelevance, and project development, and is the creator of Illinois' Protected Natural Lands Database and accompanying [I-View](#) interactive mapping application. He can be reached at [davidmholman@gmail.com](mailto:davidmholman@gmail.com).

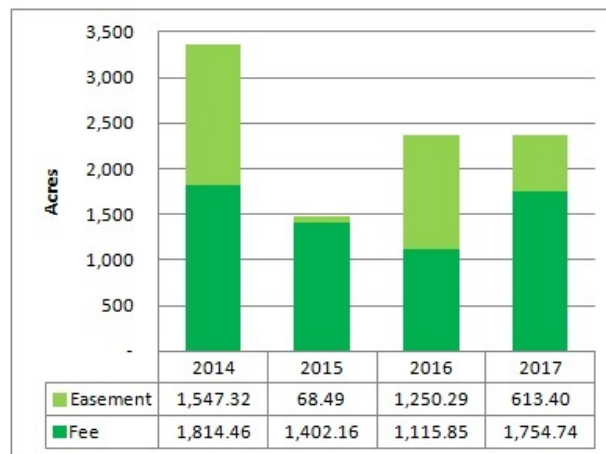
## 2017 - Year in Review

A long and memorable year soon will withdraw to the pages of what undoubtedly will be a wild history. As predictions of the future multiply and all prepare to celebrate our celestial orb's successful completion of another rotation around the Sun, can there possibly be a better way to welcome the new year than by a myopic focus on the last one? No, no there cannot. It's time for 2017 in Review! Here's what we'll look at:

- Private Sector Land Conservation
- Public Sector Land Conservation
- Natural Areas Restoration and Management
- Policy & Advocacy
- And Now For Something Completely Different
- Top 3 Most Awesome Projects
- Ownership of Navigable Rivers and Lake Beds
- 2016 Revisited
- Changes at the Top

### Private Sector Land Conservation

The successes of Illinois' conservation land trusts throughout 2017 were as varied as they are impressive, and they once again exceeded the area preserved by their public sector peers, protecting 1,808.65 acres in projects both small and very, very large. There were also a number of initiatives this past year that entailed the transfer of a property or easement from one organization to another, or the conversion of the means of protection from easement to title or vice versa. Such projects aren't included in the year's acreage totals, though these often inspiring initiatives are still discussed in detail later in this letter. Though similar to the numbers seen in 2016, the land protection projects completed over the last 12 months have been marked by an unusually large number of significantly sized properties preserved by a diverse assortment of land trusts.



In some years, there's a paucity of remarkable organizations that stand out for the size or quantity of their projects, while in others a surfeit. This year was unquestionably the latter. **Great Rivers Land Trust**

completed the largest private sector fee acquisition of my professional career with a new 570.4 acre preserve along the Mississippi River on its way to protecting 600 acres for the year, a record matched only by the **Natural Land Institute**, which also preserved just over 600 acres including a 407.6 acre property near the Wisconsin border. Not to be outdone, **Prairie Land Conservancy** preserved over 540 acres in six fee and easement projects, an achievement even more impressive when you recall that this follows the organization's acquisition of a single property of over 530 acres only three years earlier, while **The Land Conservancy of McHenry County** also completed six distinct, wholly unconnected projects by deploying an outstandingly wide range of protection tools and drawing upon long cultivated relationships. A record seventeen land trusts have collectively established new preserves and added to existing ones all while serving their communities as educational, cultural, and social institutions. After all that, I think a quick review of their work is in order! \*

\* For those who've wondered how I arrange these things, projects for each organization are generally described sequentially by their completion date.

- **Ducks Unlimited**

- 32.83 acres in northwestern McHenry County, northeast of the City of Harvard. The majority of the land is currently in agricultural production, alongside some small forested areas and an even smaller oak woodland. The most important feature of the site is Alden Creek, a first-order tributary of Nippersink Creek which flows through the property from the southwest to the northeast.



Part of a newly created preserve being assembled by the McHenry County Conservation District (discussed in the *Public Sector* section of this letter) with the help of a grant from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**,

Ducks Unlimited will hold the newly acquired site until late next year, at which point it will sell the land to the District in a bargain sale. In the interim, DU will begin making improvements on the property to create a public access point, as well as developing the engineering required to recreate a large wetland on both the newly acquired land and on property recently acquired by the District a short distance to the north.

- **Franklin Creek Conservation Association**

- 4.27 predominantly wooded acres acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Almost completely surrounded by the Illinois Department of Natural Resource's Franklin Creek State Natural Area, the land is located in north central Lee County, northwest of the Village of Franklin Grove along Old Mill Road. A roughly 1 acre homesite on the property's eastern side transitions to forest before then transitioning again to a small pasture just east of Natural Area's namesake waterway.



The Association (formerly known as the Franklin Creek Preservation Area Committee) covered the cost of the developed portion of the land on its own and will likely retain the portion of the site containing structures to use as a

storage and staging facility. The balance of the property will either be retained as well or eventually deeded to the state, which has been the historic recipient of the other properties acquired by the Association.

- **Friends of the Kankakee**

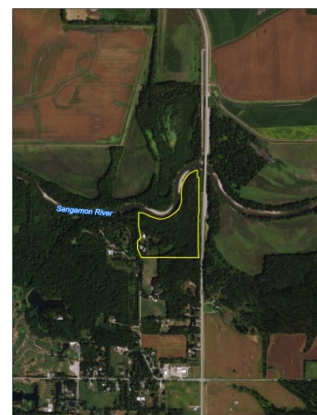
- 24.25 acres acquired with the strong support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* in what was for me a jaw dropping series of *five* projects. The new acquisitions increase the total area preserved by Friends to 307.15 acres. Most of this area, as long time readers will recall, has been subdivided into lots of  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  acres in size, making the assemblage of a preserve of several hundred acres astonishing in and of itself. A mix of forest and open field, the newly acquired parcels physically link together FOK's lands (seen in blue on the map), the newly established 66.1 acre Kankakee National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (created out of land donated to USFWS by Friends of the Kankakee), and the main body of the IDNR's 1,642 acre Iroquois County State Fish and Wildlife Area. The FOK preserve is in turn adjacent to the Indiana DNR's ~9,925 acre Willow Slough State Game Preserve, which itself abuts the ~8,100 acre Indiana portion of The Nature Conservancy's Kankakee Sands. So yeah, quite the inspirational project, and it's *all* linked together by Friends of the Kankakee.



But wait, there's more. Another parcel also acquired as part of these projects fills a prominent gap in ownership between FOK's land to the east and the National Wildlife Refuge to the west, a gap which, to give you an idea of the area's ecological quality, is almost completely surrounded by dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves (light blue crosshatch on the map). Neither the importance nor the ecological value of these additions to the protected area can be overstated.

- **Friends of the Sangamon Valley**

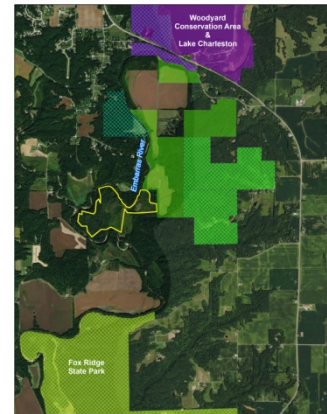
- 34.4 acres along the Sangamon River, in central Sangamon County just north of the City of Springfield's Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport along Illinois Route 29. The land was generously donated by the property's owner, who retains the right to live in his house located in the southwest corner of the site. That homesite sits on a steep bluff overlooking the Sangamon that quickly descends to a dense floodplain forest; the donated land is FOSV's first property lying directly on the main branch of its namesake river. This is the second fee property donated to Friends since 2014. That simple fact emphasizes both the strong relationships the organization has built and the profound trust it has accrued through decades of diligent efforts working with both landowners and local governments across an expansive service area in the central reaches of the state.





- **Grand Prairie Friends**

- 99.0 acres south of the City of Charleston, in southeastern Coles County. Acquired with the support of *the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the *Lumpkin Family Foundation*, and *The Conservation Fund*, the parcel lies along the Embarras River, containing large expanses of both grassland and woodland. The property adds to a growing macrosite known as the Warbler Ridge Conservation Area and discussed in some detail in the 2015 edition of this letter. GPF acquired its first parcel (141 acres) in the area, lying between the City of Charleston’s 844 acre Woodyard Conservation Area and Lake Charleston in the north and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources’ 1,720 acre Fox Ridge State Park in the south only in 2012. From that small start, they have rapidly worked to link these two areas together, creating, with this newest acquisition, a 723 acre macrosite which rises to 798 acres if one also includes an adjacent privately owned Land & Water Reserve registered with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.



The new parcel lies at the southwestern corner of the larger preserve which is now less than ¼ of a mile from the State Park. Taken together, the three macrosites incorporate 3,362 acres of varied habitat, ranging from riverine, to prairie, to open water, to forest, and are of such high quality that they are collectively home to *five* Illinois Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves (demarcated in a light blue crosshatch on the map). GPF is systematically creating an integrated ecological and recreational resource for the residents of Charleston; a project that is almost without equal anywhere in the state.

- **Great Rivers Land Trust**

- 11.25 lightly wooded acres along Piasa Creek just north of the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, in southeastern Jersey County. As those who know GRLT’s work are well aware, Piasa Creek has long been a focus for the Trust, with the organization methodically assembling long protected corridors along both the Piasa and its tributaries. This new site, which lies within a large floodplain, is downstream of these corridors and immediately upstream of additional GRLT preserves at the confluence of Piasa Creek and the Mississippi, and so further expands the geographic breadth of the protection efforts for this scenic local waterway. The bank opposite the property, though not officially protected, is owned by the U.S. government and generally managed to promote natural processes, further reinforcing the ecological value of both this property and of Great Rivers’ larger efforts along the entire course of the waterway.



- 8.29 heavily wooded acres in southwestern Jersey County, in the City of Grafton. Lying a short distance east of the 9,575 acre Pere Marquette State Park (which is located at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers), the land abuts and provides improved access to the 74 acre GRLT-owned Mason Hollow Woods (in addition to being quite picturesque in its own right), creating an 83-acre preserve that is itself a natural extension of the state park's rolling, wooded topography. If you've never visited Pere Marquette, it's difficult to conceptualize how majestic the place can be. It's a place with *actual topography*. In Illinois. Hard to believe, isn't it?



- 10.01 wooded, hilly acres bisected by the Rocky Fork tributary of Piasa Creek. Located north of the Village of Godfrey in the northwestern tip of Madison County to the northeast of the first Great Rivers property described in this section, the acquisition further demonstrates GRLT's focus on this important riverine system. The new parcel links a 39 acre GRLT property on the north (which includes an 11.1 acre parcel discussed in last year's letter) with a 27 acre GRLT property to the south, which itself lies just to the west of yet *another* small GRLT-owned property. The new acquisition thus creates a 90 acre riverine preserve that Great Rivers has been methodically piecing together year by year, and that, with this acquisition, now forms a nearly contiguous protected corridor.



- A massive 570.4 acres along the Illinois River at the literal southeastern corner of Pike County, with support from the **Grand Victoria Foundation**. Bisected by Illinois Route 100, most of the property is in agricultural production, with forested areas both along the river and blanketing steep cliffs in the far west and northwest of the site that afford a view of at least four miles east over the Illinois. Towering over 620 feet above the plain below at its highest point, the property contains three Native American burial mounds at the edge of a sheer limestone cliff that dominates the river valley below. Bee Creek crosses that valley in the property's south, flowing east into the Illinois River.



The new preserve is the single largest fee acquisition by a conservation land trust this century; a record I suspect it will long hold. Great Rivers has already begun restoration work on the agricultural portions of the property. Much of the land will be planted to a mixture of forest, grassland, and wetland floodplain following a restoration plan developed with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, with other areas of the site naturally regenerating over time.

- **Heartlands Conservancy**

- 57.34 acres of forest and lakes in the southwestern tip of Jackson County, near the border with Missouri. Acquired with the support of the **Grand Victoria Foundation** and the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, the property is completely surrounded by the Shawnee National Forest, to which the site will be added. The Shawnee is the largest protected area in the state, encompassing ~285,000 acres across nine counties in southern Illinois. The area encompassing the National Forest began to be assembled only in 1933. The majority of what is today forest had been cleared for agriculture in the 19th century. By the early decades of the 20th, the land, never fecund to begin with, had been exhausted. The federal government bought out failing and abandoned farms, and thus the modern forest was born. The newly acquired parcel complements two other projects that Heartlands closed on in 2016 and which were discussed in last year’s letter; all three properties will eventually be sold to the U.S. Forest Service, the former two directly by Heartlands and the latter by Ducks Unlimited. This newest property was conveyed to DU at the close of the year; Ducks will likely complete the transfer to the Forest Service for incorporation into the National Forest in 2018.



These three projects continue a decade-plus collaboration between Heartlands and multiple federal conservation agencies. Heartlands has served as an agent for both the Forest Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (the organization played a multi-year role last decade in the acquisition of the Rockwood Island addition to the USFWS’s Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge), acquiring and then conveying to the agencies both inholdings at their respective sites and other ecologically valuable properties throughout southwestern Illinois. It’s an oft-overlooked type of public-private partnership that permits the expansion of publicly owned preserves by seizing time-limited opportunities that the public sector is often ill-equipped to pursue on its own.

- 9.885 acres in a conservation easement in southern Clinton County, just north of Illinois Route 161, acquired as part of a mitigation project. The property is mostly open field with a small amount of timber, and lies along the north bank of Lost Creek, a tributary of Crooked Creek (part of the Middle Kaskaskia watershed). This acquisition continues a long tradition for Heartlands of serving as the holder of easements granted as part of such projects; a partnership with their local communities that provides a very beneficial service throughout southwestern Illinois (and occasionally beyond). Lost Creek itself is a high quality riverine/wetland system, a fact reinforced by the presence of a 150 acre Land & Water Reserve on private property just to the southwest of the new site. Both the easement and LWR are part of a larger wetland complex, so the restored property will serve to slightly reduce the nutrient load flowing into the downstream Reserve.





- 8.72 acres in a conservation easement in the northeast of the city of Belleville, in northern St. Clair County. The property contains a small woodland adjacent to one of the last agricultural operations in the community, with a residential house in the southeast corner. The site was acquired by Heartlands in 2015, and discussed in that year's edition of this letter. Heartlands' plan, now completed, was to sell the land to a conservation buyer who would then place an easement over the property. This two year, multistep project minimized the financial investment required to protect the land, which in turn allowed the project to come to fruition.



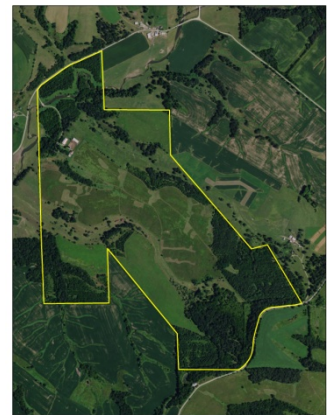
- **Illinois Audubon Society**

- Two properties totaling ~779.4 water-logged acres were transferred from Ducks Unlimited (DU). Located in the southwestern tip of Mason County, the parcels were acquired in 2015 and 2016...though *both* were discussed in 2016's letter due to my being unaware of the 2015 acquisition at the time of its closing. The land is adjacent to the northeastern corner of the 11,890 acre Sanganois State Fish and Wildlife Refuge which is itself buffered by two DU easements totaling 654.5 acres. As I wrote at the time, these acquisitions substantially improved the hydrological protection of the area while providing "new opportunities for its management and expansion".



- **Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation**

- 406.3 acres donated by a longtime supporter, continuing a years-long tradition of huge, truly inspiring acquisitions by the organization. Located in southeastern Jo Daviess County east of the Village of Elizabeth and southwest of the Village of Stockton, the property (the Foundation's first fee-owned preserve in this part of the County) contains large grasslands alongside woodlands, savanna and active pasture complemented by a farmstead and homesite located in the northwest. While JDCF has numerous large easements (including last year's 1,084 acre record holder for the largest private sector natural areas easement in the state), the new preserve is its largest fee-owned preserve by a fair margin, providing an opportunity for large-scale restoration efforts that few other land trusts can equal. The grantor has worked closely with the Foundation to establish the new preserve as a destination bird refuge named Valley of Eden Bird Sanctuary; named after the Eden Family that settled the valley in the late 1800's. Trails, parking facilities and signage are being installed throughout the site, which is expected to draw birders from up to two or three hours away, as it will provide one of the few locations to view numerous rare avian visitors to the region including nesting Henslow's sparrows, bobolinks and short-eared owls.



JDCF's involvement with the property didn't begin with its acquisition, having held an easement over the land for the last decade. In preparation for acquiring the property, they worked with the **Natural Land Institute**, which agreed to take on the easement so that ownership of the restriction and the fee would not be held by the same organization (having the fee title to a parcel and an easement over the land held by one organization is at the very least contrary to Best Practices and at worst risks the easement's integrity as there is the potential for a conflict of interest between the needs of an organization in its role as a landowner and as a guardian of the restrictions agreed to in the easement). The partnership between JDCF and NLI both ensured the long-term protection of the property and preserved the integrity of the conservation easement as a legal instrument. This is simply the latest example of a deep and complimentary partnership between these two northwestern Illinois land trusts; a partnership that can and should serve as a template for the rest of the state.

- Moving from fee to easement this time rather than easement to fee, 79.8 acres owned by the Foundation was transferred to the City of Galena, which in turn granted the Foundation a conservation easement over the land. This was the conclusion of a project made possible through the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and **The Conservation Fund**. Located in northwestern Jo Daviess County, the property, the fee acquisition of which was described in last year's letter, contains open fields, woodlands, and a prairie restoration on former agricultural fields that began in the fall of last year and continued through the current year with a special focus on clearing a 14 acre oak savanna. As I discussed in 2016, the site is an addition to another property, 100 acres in size, that JDCF had previously acquired, deeded to the city, and assumed an easement over, and is also part of a larger 273 acre macrosite that includes another Foundation property lying opposite a public roadway to the west.



The City will maintain walking trails being installed on the site, while JDCF will manage the balance of the property, continuing its restoration to a prairie and oak savanna ecosystem. The entire multi-partner and multiyear effort can and indeed should become a case study in effective community engagement and public-private cooperation.

- A 69.36 acre conservation easement in north central Jo Daviess County. Predominantly restored prairie (planted after the property was enrolled in the USDA Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program) bordered by small woodlands and with a homesite along the property's southern edge, the easement lies within the Scales Mound region northeast of the City of Galena. Just as the 406 acre property described earlier in this section was the Foundation's first fee simple foray into the southeastern portion of its service area, so too is this easement their first acquisition in the north central area of the County. Both projects give form to the



Foundation's express aim to expand their work beyond a traditional core focused in the more heavily populated west and southwest of the County, making the Foundation a true County-wide organization in fact as well as name.

- In a unique recreation initiative, JDCF worked with three landowners and the local Township over multiple years to vacate ~0.3 miles of old roadway right-of-way just east of the Mississippi River in southwestern Jo Daviess County so that the land can be used to extend a major community trail running south from Galena. The Township, not being in the business of trail construction, let alone trail maintenance or management elected to abjure the rights granted by the right-of-way's dedication. Vacating those rights then returned full ownership and control of the properties, two of which are covered by easements held by JDCF, to their underlying private owners.



The Foundation is working with the landowners to eventually deed to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources the vacated right-of-way property, which will maintain the new trail and open it to public use. While not a certainty, the transfer will likely take place next year. This is a project that required patience, innovation, strong landowner relationships, creativity, and dedication in equal measure. It is something that few land trusts in the state would have the ability to bring to realization; the fact that it has been is yet another testament to JDCF's experience, its team, and its enduring partnership with the local community.

- **Lake Bluff Open Lands Association**

- 0.38 acres of wet-mesic prairie within two housing lots in Lake Bluff, in east central Lake County. The lots were inholdings in a larger sedge meadow, wet prairie, wet-mesic and mesic prairie complex that lies along the Skokie River with a small amount of dry mesic forest in the far east. Most of the site is owned by the Village of Lake Bluff while being managed by Lake Bluff Open Lands Association. The Association has been acquiring inholdings at the larger site, a platted but unbuilt residential subdivision, since 1996, and in 2010 they and the Village enrolled their respective properties in the Illinois Nature Preserves program with the registration of the 24.2 acre Skokie River Prairie Land & Water Reserve. Buffering the Reserve to the south is the Lake County Forest Preserve District's 85.6 acre Oriole Grove Forest Preserve, which in turn abuts the Lake Forest Open Lands Association's 71.2 acre Skokie River Nature Preserve (a site which is also adjacent to numerous LFOLA-held conservation easements). With the acquisition of these two parcels, only three lots remain in non-conservation ownership. Should they eventually be acquired, the partners plan to increase the Reserve's size by over 40% by vacating the platted but unbuilt roadway and alley rights-of-way that bisect the site.





- **Natural Land Institute**

- A whopping 407.6 acres in the northeastern corner of Winnebago County just east of I-90 and on the border with Boone County. Deeded to NLI in the will of a local resident, the property is divided into two parcels, with over 150 acres of agricultural fields in a corn & soybean rotation buffering woodlands, savannas, grasslands, and even an abandoned limestone quarry. The eastern parcel is dominated by agricultural fields, and is bisected by a branch of Dry Run Creek running from the northeast to the southwest which is buffered by mature hardwoods. The western tract contains agricultural fields, white pine, and 170 acres of prairie grasses. The site offers opportunities to both restore and manage large tracts of natural land while concurrently generating income through agricultural activity. One of the largest fee acquisitions in decades, the property is both a diverse addition to NLI's stewarded lands and an example of the great successes that strong relationships with the local community can bring.



- 160.0 acres in central Ogle County, west of the City of Byron and south of the Village of Leaf River. A large number of high glacial hills run throughout the site, with the Leaf River to the north and Silver Creek to the south (both tributaries of the Rock River). The land is primarily an open grassland (historically having been an upland prairie) with a ~20 acre hilltop oak savanna in the southwest. The steep hills were never conducive for extensive row crop agriculture, and as a result, harbor several native grassland flora species, albeit in low numbers. The property is therefore an ideal restoration opportunity. NLI acquired the site for the **Byron Forest Preserve District**, which subsequently acquired the property later in the year, a project made possible through the generous support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**.



- 34.7 acres in northeastern Winnebago County, south of the Rock River in the Village of Rockton, and adjacent to an additional 33.3 acre woodland and park owned by the Village. Donated by a former area resident so that it might be forever preserved as a nature reserve, the densely wooded land contains Chinquapin oak and Ironwood, which transitions into a former limestone quarry that has been thoroughly reforested. NLI will restore the property using a generous endowment from the land's donor, eventually opening the site to the local community so that they too might enjoy the forests and rock faces that brought so much pleasure to the landowners over decades of hiking and camping in this oasis in the heart of the County.



- 131.0 acres in northern Winnebago County along the Pecatonica River (a tributary of the Rock River) southwest of the Village of Rockton, of which 83.1 acres were previously protected via an NLI-held conservation easement (that easement was transferred to the local Soil & Water Conservation District shortly before the property’s acquisition). Predominantly covered by wetlands and wet forest, the site is divided into two tracts which are connected by another NLI conservation easement. Taken together, the fee and easement area encompasses 300 acres along the river, incorporating fields, forests, an oxbow lake and wetlands. Completely undeveloped, the combined preserve’s size, location, and isolation provide considerable high quality habitat. It’s notable that this is the second fee acquisition of the year deeded to NLI via a will. The Institute had worked closely with the property’s owner since at least the easement’s signing in 2006, and the donation of the land is as powerful a demonstration that I conceive of the trust and confidence the organization has earned from its supporters and its community.



- **Openlands**

- 33.56 acres (33.781 gross acres) of wetlands and agricultural fields in northern McHenry County, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Located directly south of a 27.1 acre property acquired by Openlands last year, this acquisition links that property with a 26.1 acre easement acquired by the Land Conservancy of McHenry County in 2015, creating an 86.8 acre protected riverine corridor in one of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge’s Core Areas. As I’ve written previously, 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”. It is no exaggeration to state that Openlands has been *the* driving force in beginning to turn the concept of the Hackmatack NWR into reality. Acquisitions such as this are a major reason why.



- **ParkLands Foundation**

- 69.494 acres acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and the **Grand Victoria Foundation**. Containing ~0.7 miles of INAI Mackinaw River frontage in southern Woodford County, the site, named the Hayes Woods Nature Preserve fills a gap between existing ParkLands Foundation properties, and more broadly adds to a network of Foundation preserves extending over 11 miles along the INAI-designated river. The heavily wooded preserve sits on rolling topography, starting at a high point in the middle of the site before descending to the Mackinaw. The property’s dense forest





provides terrestrial habitat for local fauna and flora while furthering ParkLands' ability to protect the river and its rich aquatic fauna. That value of that river was reinforced this past fall when ParkLands volunteers found the state-threatened Mudpuppy during a survey at the Preserve.

- **Prairie Land Conservancy**

- 42.56 acres in a conservation easement in central McDonough County, just west of Macomb. Acquired with the support of **The Conservation Fund**, the property contains mesic woodlands surrounded by agricultural fields, and is adjacent to a 182 acre Land & Water Reserve registered by the easement's grantors in pieces over the last twenty years. The combined 224+ acre preserve includes a small creek a short distance to the east of the easement, while as with the new property, agricultural fields are interspersed with woodlands throughout the site. The land and project together stand as a testament to and vision of both the landowners and PLC.



- 120.31 acres in a conservation easement containing a mix of woodland and pasture through which runs a small tributary of the East Fork of the La Moine River. Located immediately west of the Village of Bardolph in east-central McDonough County, the easement was acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and **The Conservation Fund**, and provides a roosting site for a colony of Little Brown Bats. With the spread of white-nose syndrome throughout the state, such sanctuaries have grown in import, as the more colonies susceptible species maintain, the better their chances of weathering the fungal infestation. As an added bonus, the easement adjoins the Thurster Woods State Natural Area owned by Western Illinois University (which the bats also utilize), creating a 152 acre public/private preserve that provides habitat for a troubled species.



- 199.4 acres (200.92 gross acres) in a conservation easement located in central Schuyler County, west of Rushville. Acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and **The Conservation Fund**, the easement is divided into three units. The northern unit, ~25 acres, is comprised of a combination native and planted woodland surrounding a home site. Immediately to the south and coming in at ~10 acres, the central unit contains a planted woodland, native timber, and a small waterway. Finally, the ~165 acre southern unit, about 2/3 of a mile away, is a mosaic of grassland, ag fields, planted woodland and native hardwoods. The property is the first land trust acquisition of either fee or easement in Schuyler County.



- 13.25 acres at the eastern tip of Fulton County, just south of the Village of Banner and west of the Illinois River. The parcel contains a remnant hillside prairie, six acres of grassland (half of which is an emergent prairie), and upland woods. The land was acquired with the support of **The Conservation Fund** through its role as a steward of mitigation funding, in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Enbridge Pipeline Corporation, and the South Flanagan Pipeline Mitigation Fund.



The property connects two tracts totaling 106 acres, part of the larger 530 acre Prairie Hills Wetland Preserve acquired by PLC in 2014. The preserve connects the 4,293 acre Illinois DNR-owned Banner Marsh State Fish and Wildlife Area and the 6,750 acre Rice Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area, creating an 11,586 acre macrosite. The parcel's acquisition fills a gap in ownership and in so doing creates a contiguous preserve, providing improved habitat opportunities for grassland birds and resident bats, including the federally endangered Indiana Bat.

- 96.8 acres in south central McDonough County, a bit over a mile from the Schuyler County border. Bisected by Grindstone Creek, the land contains upland hardwoods in the hilly north and west, transitioning to bottomland hardwoods near the creek and further south. Exemplifying the property's ecological vitality, the creek's floodplain is home to a Great Blue Heron rookery, while the westernmost portion of the site hasn't been logged for some time. The land, with an endowment for its management (there are a fair number of invasives requiring attention, something that PLC will begin addressing in the near future) was donated by a local coal company as part of a settlement with the Illinois Attorney General's Environmental Division, the Sierra Club, and the Environmental Law & Policy Center, and is PLC's first preserve in the southern stretch of McDonough County.

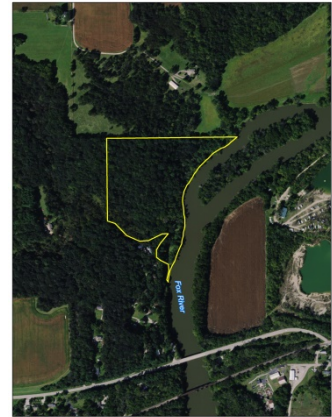


- 70.8 acres in a conservation easement less than a mile to the northeast of the new 120.3 acre PLC easement described above. The property is a working cattle ranch lying along the La Moine River in McDonough County, just north of the Village of Bardolph. In the west of the site, 30 acres of rolling grasslands are interspersed with cross fencing that allows the herdsman to utilize rotational grazing techniques to maximize forage uptake. The remaining acreage is predominantly upland and bottomland hardwood forest that buffer the river and benefit both migratory & native birds and terrestrial resident wildlife.



- **The Conservation Foundation**

- 22.5 acres in a conservation easement along the Fox River in northeastern LaSalle County, just outside the Village of Sheridan. The hilly and heavily wooded property exemplifies TCF's strong, years-long focus on the protection and restoration of the lower Fox covering the southern Kane County to central LaSalle County area (where the Fox meets the Illinois). The Foundation has engaged and continues to engage in a multipronged strategy to protect and restore the river including easements, fee simple land acquisition (the Dayton Bluffs Preserve in Ottawa, just north of the Fox/Illinois intersection), buying and flipping property to local Forest Preserve Districts, and designing and leading a land protection planning process involving all major local stakeholders. Their work is both thorough and impressive, and at least from my perspective, is an excellent template that the rest of us would do well to study!



- 63.0 acres in a conservation easement along the Kishwaukee River in northeastern DeKalb County, in the Village of Kingston. The southern ¼ of the property is former agricultural land that was removed from production and planted to prairie following its enrollment in the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Most of the rest of the land is in corn and bean production, with a wooded corridor buffering the river which forms the property's western and southern boundaries. The Kishwaukee is the major river system of its region, and so improving land management along its route provides real ecological advantages that impact an expansive geographic area stretching from just north of the state line south past the cities of Sycamore and Rochelle.



- Continuing a 2017 trend among the state's land trusts of moving properties from fee to easement or easement to fee, a 9.49 acre property donated to the Foundation in 2011 was sold to a private owner, who immediately granted TCF a conservation easement over the land. Located in northwestern Will County on the border of Will and Kendall Counties, southwest of the Village of Plainfield, the small parcel contains grassland, an open pond, and a former home site. The land's generous donation and subsequent sale have provided the Foundation resources with which to both maintain and grow their operations, while the easement ensures the property's permanent protection.





- **The Land Conservancy of McHenry County**

- 41.873 acres (41.898 gross acres) in northwestern McHenry County east of the City of Harvard, acquired with the strong support of the **Grand Victoria Foundation** which also provided support towards the land's long-term management. Open bur oak savanna, high quality sedge meadow and prairie are interwoven across the property, interspersed with a pond and glacial kame. Lying just 660 feet west of the McHenry County Conservation District's 30 acre Harvard Savanna preserve, the property, which includes a portion of the Harvard Savanna Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site, is without question one of the more ecologically valuable properties protected in 2017.



- 23.549 acres (24.282 gross acres) in a conservation easement to the north of the previously described property, near the Illinois/Wisconsin border, along Wright Road in an area known as High Point, so named because it is the highest glaciated spot in the state. The easement agreement continues a tradition of private preservation and restoration by residents of the area, whose work last decade prompted the McHenry County Conservation District to purchase the 250 acre High Point Conservation Area (visible to the north on the map) that was in turn soon buffered by private conservation easements held by TLC.



The property contains a diverse mix of landscapes, including prairie and oak/hickory woods, a headwaters stream of Nippersink Creek which bisects the site from north to south, and, in the east, a hay field which the owners refrain from harvesting until the middle of July in order to protect grassland birds such as bobolinks that may be nesting in the area. The property is upstream from both the M CCD's Alden Sedge Meadow and the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge.

- A 77.1 acre conservation easement transferred from the City of Woodstock, located in central McHenry County. Predominantly wetland with an oak woodland in the far north, the property was placed under easement almost a decade ago as part of a development proposal that eventually failed. A local community foundation acquired the land for conservation purposes with the intention of eventually transferring the property to a conservation entity. In the interim, lack of resources precluded active management, leading to a decline in the impacted the natural areas. Following several years of negotiations, the Foundation deeded the property to the City of Woodstock, which first transferred the easement it held over the land to TLC to prevent the easement from merging with the fee.



As part of the deal, the foundation gave TLC \$25K for the management and protection of the property; \$10K was added to the Conservancy's easement defense fund while the balance will be used for initial restoration work on the site. TLC will continue to manage the property after initial restoration work has been completed as part of a long-standing agreement covering the management of several City-owned natural areas.

- 1.92 acres in a conservation easement in east-central McHenry County north of the City of Crystal Lake and southwest of the City of McHenry, along Crystal Springs and Crystal Lake Roads. Although small, the site contains a remnant oak grove as well as one of the oldest remaining one-room school houses in the county, the Holcombville School built in 1858. The land is at the intersection of two major roads, so would have been a prime target for commercial development if not protected. Additionally, the site expands TLC's land protection in the Powers Creek sub-watershed of Boone Creek, one of the highest quality streams in the region. Protection through conservation easements and land donations total more than 300 acres in this headwater area.



- A 36.43 acre dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve in central McHenry County, on the east side of the Village of Bull Valley. As with the 77.1 acre easement described earlier, this is a previously protected property that TLC has acquired from another local organization. As can be inferred from the property's status as an Illinois Nature Preserve, it offers some of the finer examples of less abundant ecosystems within the County. Nestled in a semi-developed part of the County, the site, which is adjacent to an additional 8.76 acres of Nature Preserve Buffer contains a rare high quality graminoid fen. As per the INPC, less than 400 acres of such high quality fen still exists in the entirety of the state. Complementing the fen is a sedge meadow of similar quality and a small dry mesic forest that includes mature white and bur oaks.



- 1.94 acres in central McHenry County immediately south of the City of Woodstock. This small property lies sandwiched between two roads, directly south of TLC's 9 acre Prairie Ridge Fen easement (and north of the McHenry County Conservation District's 153 acre Kishwaukee Headwater's site). While not of great ecological value in its own right, TLC acquired the land in order to gain the ability to manage the invasive species on the site that have been spreading north into the high quality fen protected by the easement. By managing this property, they will thus be able to both improve and maintain the fen area!





It's worth mentioning that the land was acquired through McHenry County's annual tax sale, in which property can be acquired for the cost of the unpaid, delinquent taxes on the parcel(s). This little used conservation tool enables provides an affordable means with which to expand conservation holdings.

- **The Nature Conservancy**

- 0.18 woody acres from two house lots in the southwest corner of Gensburg-Markham Prairie, acquired by purchasing the property's unpaid taxes during the County's tax sale (a tool that TNC has patiently and diligently used for decades to expand the prairie and its sister sites). The showcase site of the Indian Boundary Prairies in the City of Markham in Cook County, just south of Chicago, Gensburg-Markham Prairie is a rare unplowed prairie which survived, beyond all logic, in the heart of Chicagoland. The land will eventually be restored, but today serves as part of as a buffer to the core grassland; both prairie and buffer are dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve (seen in a light blue crosshatch on the map).

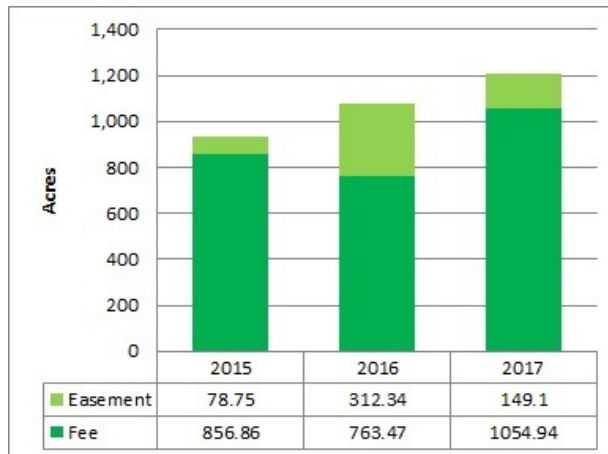


- **Special Mention**

- This one isn't included in the headline acreage number as it covers not an organization, but an individual. Dr. Marianne Hahn, whose work I've extolled in previous editions of this letter, acquired for conservation two parcels totaling ~5.4 acres in the Kankakee Sands of southeastern Kankakee County, adjacent to properties owned by TNC.

### *Public Sector Land Conservation*

The theme of the past year in the public sector was small but tactical acquisitions. These were matched by a few larger projects primarily in the northern reaches of the state pursued by County Conservation and Forest Preserve Districts. Taken together, the state's public agencies protected 1,204.04 acres over the year; a new record over the three years that I've been tracking such efforts.



As with the private sector, there were a number of projects that involved the transfer of property from one conservation entity to another; while described below, those transfers aren't included in the headline number. The story of the year is the growth of the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, which completed *nine* diverse acquisition projects and is responsible for fully 44% of all land protected by the public sector in 2017. Also of special note this year is work being done by the McHenry County Conservation District, which has made significant progress on a long-term initiative to protect lands along and feeding into Nippersink Creek, one of the County's premier waterways. The Conservation District employs a mix of fee simple and easement acquisitions that is unique among its peers in recent years. These and other land acquisitions around the state have expanded both natural habitats and public access, completing some preserves while adding to a still expanding tapestry at others.

- **Byron Forest Preserve District**

- As described above in the 'Private Sector' section of this letter, the Forest Preserve District acquired a 160.0 acre parcel in central Ogle County from The Natural Land Institute in a project supported by the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*; NLI had in turn acquired the property earlier in the year.

- **City of Chicago/City of Wilmington**

- **Openlands** completed the transfer of 0.8 acres to the City of Wilmington as an addition to the City's South Island Park and 2.7 wetland acres to the City of Chicago as an addition to Indian Ridge Marsh. Both sites are managed by their city's respective Park Districts. The Wilmington property lies along Illinois Route 53 on an island in the Kankakee River. The Chicago property is located in the southeast corner of the City near the Indiana border and is part of the Calumet region. The marsh, though degraded, hosts ~800 nesting Illinois endangered Black-crowned Night Herons, making the site of significant ecological value.



Openlands purchased and had been holding both properties until the two municipalities were ready to take ownership; part of a long-standing program which facilitates the growth of local parks and conservation areas by purchasing lands at the request of local governments that intend to acquire the properties when funds are secured.

- **DeKalb County Forest Preserve District**

- 3.2 acres in the southeastern corner of DeKalb County south of US-34. The linear property will serve as a trail corridor, with the District installing such a trail to connect the Somonauk village library at the western end of the new property with the 72.2 acre Sannauk Forest Preserve at the eastern end. The new trail will provide the first direct link between the 1,900 person village and the preserve; a restored woodland that also holds the distinction of being the first property acquired by the District. Somonauk Creek runs through the eastern end of the site, which is crisscrossed with hiking trails and public amenities including a picnic area and numerous open-air shelters.



- 15.5 acres (16.12 gross acres) in north central DeKalb County as an addition to the Haines Creek Conservation Corridor, which is northwest of the Village of Kingston. Acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, Haines Creek flows north to south through the western half of the property, which is predominantly in agricultural production. The property is part of the aforementioned Haines Creek Conservation Corridor; an initiative striving to create an FPD-owned preserve running along the creek from Cherry Valley Road in the north to the Kishwaukee River in the south (about 2 miles upstream from the new TCF easement described earlier in this letter). First discussed in the 2015 edition of this letter when the District initially expanded its holdings, also with the support of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the new addition creates a 99 acre preserve and brings the newly enlarged site to within a single property of the Kishwaukee. Built from a single 43 acre acquisition, the Conservation Corridor has steadily pushed south as it has grown into an impressive multiyear project that I look forward to writing about again in the years to come.



- **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**

- 2.72 acres as an addition to the 95.54 acre Salt Creek Park preserve in northwestern DuPage County, at the southern edge of the City of Wood Dale and directly off the road of the same name. The property consists of two separate lots, each of which contains at least one residential building and associated structures and infrastructure. The parcels are otherwise quite wooded with a number of large oaks; a natural extension of the forest found in the existing preserve. The District will demolish the buildings, extensive driveways and other infrastructure, restoring the entire property to woodland. The addition adds to a preserve that is complemented by the local park district, which maintains an 18 acre Nature Center opposite the new addition.
- A 2.0 acre residential lot with a house and detached garage as an addition to the 123.6 acre Warrenville Grove preserve in eastern Warrenville (in the west central part of the County). The new addition includes large oaks and underground springs. The property was acquired as a life estate, in which the previous landowner can live on the land until he either moves or passes away. The District will then take full possession of the land, demolish the structures, and integrate the property into the larger site. Life estates and Term estates (in which the seller has the right to live on the property for a period of time, often 10, 20, or 30 years) have been heavily utilized by the FPDDC for many years to significant success.





- 22.0 acres in Wood Dale that expand the Salt Creek Marsh Forest Preserve to 154 acres, acquired with support from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Located north of the Salt Creek Park parcel described above, between Devon and Thorndale Avenues, the new acquisition runs along the eponymous creek, linking two small District holdings and separated from a third District parcel (as well as a golf course owned by a local park district) by a parcel owned by the local electricity distribution company. The new greenway will be cleared of invasives, to be replaced with a native sedge and grass mix. Adding ½ mile of stream corridor mostly taking in both of the Creek’s banks, the parcel is immediately upstream from the main body of the Salt Creek Marsh Forest Preserve. The restoration and management work on the property will therefore improve the health not only of the stream but of the larger existing preserve.



- **Forest Preserve District of Kane County**

- A 6.25 acre inholding of the 1,334.3 acre Freeman Kame-Meagher Forest Preserve. Situated in north-central Kane County west of the Village of Gilberts, the property was the remainder of a larger parcel sold to the District in 2015. Divided by a public road, the north side contains a steep, wooded incline; the bottom of a kame which rises to the northwest. The area south of the road contained a residence (demolished immediately prior to the closing) and had been largely developed as a homesite. Though small, the land’s acquisition simplifies management of two prairie areas that were previously separated by the new property, the western of which encompassed the earlier purchase.



- 70.86 acres of agricultural fields in southern Kane County west of US-47 and south of I-88 as an addition to the 159.8 acre Sauer Family Prairie Kame Forest Preserve. The preserve, located northwest of the Village of Sugar Grove, contains a remnant prairie atop its namesake, 30’ high kame, both of which will be buffered by the addition, which lies immediately to the south of the geographic feature. The new acquisition will eventually be restored to a wetland; complementing the restoration of an earlier addition located to the west of the kame, which was restored to a wetland community a decade ago shortly after its purchase. The new property is the first acquired using funds from a referendum passed in the spring of 2017, discussed later in this letter.



- 12.54 acres containing an agricultural field and pasture as an addition to the 196.1 acre Cardinal Creek Forest Preserve in central Kane County. The original preserve was acquired in 2006, and as with the addition, is still in agricultural production. Two small intermittent streams run through the northeast of the preserve (one of which lies a short distance to the south of the new property). The Forest Preserve District plans to restore the entire property to a mix of oak savanna, prairie, and wetland. The new acquisition should facilitate this effort, as it both increases the depth of the site as well as buffering the waterway to the south. In addition to depth, the property provides the first fee-title access to the preserve off of Burlington Road to the east.



- 25.89 secluded, mostly wooded acres were generously donated to the Forest Preserve in central Kane County, on the north side of the Village of Campton Hills. Stony Creek, a tributary of Ferson Creek (which in turn is a tributary of the Fox River) runs west to east through the north of the preserve, which for sixty years was a retreat for its owners; a husband and wife team of globally renowned physicists who spent years both in Europe and at Fermilab in nearby Batavia, IL. The donors had long wanted their refuge, at which they often worked on their research, to be preserved in perpetuity. Restrictions incorporated into the warranty deed ensures that the property will indeed be forever be used in accordance with the wishes of these remarkable individuals who cared for the land over more than half a century.



- 80.18 acres in southwestern Kane County, a few miles northeast of the Village of Hinckley. Stitched together through the acquisition of parcels owned by three different owners, most of the land is an oak-hickory woodland, bisected by a small agricultural strip. Local residents have used the site for many years for both community events and private recreation; a practice that acquisition by the District ensures can continue for years to come.



The property is adjacent to and buffered by a 170 acre farm that is forever protected from development by a conservation easement acquired by Kane County (*not* the Forest Preserve) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service as part of a unique, decade-plus farmland protection program in which the County used grants from a local casino to purchase easements on agricultural land from willing sellers seeking to secure the future of their farms in a rapidly developing region. The program ultimately purchased easements on over 5,000 acres in the County's southwest, all but guaranteeing the area will long remain an agricultural hub.



- 83.02 acres of agricultural fields as an addition to the Binnie Forest Preserve in northern Kane County west of the Village of Carpentersville. The property is part of a former wetland complex that drains west and then north into one of the early tributaries of the Kishwaukee River. The portion of the complex lying on the District’s new land will be restored in the near future.



The addition increases the Forest Preserve to just over 250 acres... but the District property doesn’t exist in isolation. The new property is both bordered by and links together two parcels on which has been placed a 124 acre conservation easement held by The Conservation Foundation. To the south, the preserve is adjacent to a 100 acre property owned by the Dundee Township Open Space District, which owns an additional 70 acres south of that, and a third, 24 acre property adjacent to the TCF easement. Taken together with local municipal park lands, over 450 acres of often quality wetland and upland are preserved in and around a developed suburban area.

- 51.94 acres as an addition to the 797 acre Muirhead Springs Forest Preserve in north central Kane County, southwest of the City of Elgin and north of the Village of Campton Hills. Currently in agricultural production, the land will be restored to prairie as an addition to the large grassland restoration that has already been completed on ~575 acres immediately to the east. Muirhead is one of the largest prairie restoration projects in the County (and one of the larger such projects in northeastern Illinois). The new parcel provides the District with an opportunity to expand this work and in so doing enhance its ecological benefits, providing improved habitat for grassland birds that require large, unbroken grasslands.



- 4.54 acres of woodland, an open water wetland and a residence as an addition to the 389.6 acre Oakhurst Forest Preserve (which is also adjacent to and buffered by an 18.8 acre local park). Located in the southeast corner of Kane County and surrounded by the City of Aurora, the new property links a small wetland to the west to the hydrologically connected 50+ acre Lake Patterson to the northeast. It also closes a gap in District ownership that will enable the management of the area as a cohesive whole. The District will soon be redesigning the preserve, further increasing the value of this small parcel that both simplifies the property’s boundary and eases future restoration and management activities.



- ~202 acres in agricultural production as an addition to the largest unit of the 743 acre Johnson’s Mound Forest Preserve in central Kane County east of the Village of Elburn. Lying adjacent to a wooded kame over 50’ tall that is dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, a portion of the new addition is hydrologically upstream of the Nature Preserve, while other portions of the site drain north and west into the rest of the Forest Preserve. As such, restoration of the property will buffer an uncommon geological and ecological feature (that is also a visible marker of the region’s glacial history) while expanding varying habitats more broadly and providing depth to a site that has heretofore been more linear in nature.



- **Forest Preserves of Winnebago County**

- 164.6 acres along limestone cliffs overlooking the Rock River, this property, located on the border of Winnebago and Ogle Counties southwest of Rockford was acquired with strong support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*. The brand new Cedar Cliff Forest Preserve contains a mix of woodlands (60-odd acres) and farmland (90-odd acres), the latter of which will be restored to short grass prairie. The area will also be opened for passive recreational use with the installation of a parking lot, trails, and picnic facilities. The Forest Preserve District hopes to work with the neighboring Byron Forest Preserve District as well as the Natural Land Institute, based in Rockford, to further expand the protected area by creating a bi-county greenway.



- **Illinois Department of Natural Resources**

- 1 acre as an addition to Horseshoe Lake-Alexander State Fish and Wildlife Area in southern Alexander County in the southwestern corner of the state. Located at the northwest corner of the state property a short distance from the namesake lake, the property contains a residence and associated buildings. It was acquired as part of a longstanding flood buyout program through the Office of Water Resources.



Keen-eyed readers will notice that Horseshoe Lake itself isn’t shaded green (denoting conservation ownership) on the accompanying map, despite ostensibly being part of the State Park. The reason behind this is both complex and convoluted, but fortunately there’s an entire section devoted to the subject later on this letter, so if you’ve somehow made it this far, read on!

- 153.6 acres as an addition to the IDNR’s Woodford State Fish and Wildlife Area in western Woodford County. The parcel is mostly inundated by Upper Peoria Lake (part of the Illinois River) with a small wooded area of shoreline located in the southeast. The property was first acquired by Ducks Unlimited in 2016 with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** (and was *not* discussed in last year’s letter, as I didn’t learn of the property’s acquisition until early this year...but it does get an honorary mention in the 2016 Revisited section this year!). Interestingly, though the Fish and Wildlife Area is over 8,400 acres in size, the vast majority of the site, including the land adjacent to this parcel, is in fact leased to the DNR by the U.S. government.



- 4.94 acres in northwestern Lake County in two additions to Chain O’Lakes State Park. The first addition is 4.44 acres of completely inundated land well to the southeast of the main park; one of the portions of Fox Lake that is not owned in trust for the people of the state (see the section of this letter devoted to ‘Ownership of Navigable Rivers and Lake Beds’ for a detailed discussion on the subject of the public ownership of waterways). The second addition comprises 0.50 acres of wooded wetland on the eastern edge of the park, just south of Lake Marie. Both properties were acquired virtually free of charge from the government of Lake County, which had owned the parcels, having acquired them due to a lack of payment of property taxes by the previous owners.



- 47.46 acres in north central Lake County adjoining the Village of Antioch as an addition to the 1,002 acre Redwing Slough State Natural Area. Located immediately south of the border with Wisconsin, the oddly-shaped parcel is a completed wetland mitigation bank which links two parcels deeded to the State by the mitigation company when work on the site first began.

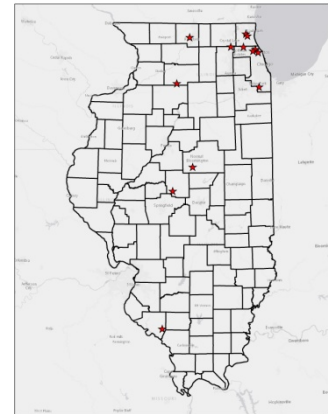
Mitigation banks are an innovative tool with which to compensate for the loss or degradation of wetlands to development, and when they’re constructed adjacent to existing preserves they provide the added benefit of adding to the site’s depth. Now that the land has been incorporated into the Natural Area, the DNR can expand their management efforts to begin cutting back the invasives which occupy much of the property, simultaneously expanding the preserve and improving its ecological health.





- **Illinois Nature Preserves Commission**

- The INPC added a baker’s dozen of dedications and registrations to the Nature Preserves system totaling 1,800.8 acres; 655.42 of Nature Preserves/Nature Preserve Buffers and 1,145.38 acres of Land & Water Reserves. 79.1 acres had no prior form of protection, while the rest of the sites were owned by public conservation entities and/or had prior forms of protection in place. Four new Nature Preserves and two new Land & Water Reserves were created, while seven sites were expanded. The largest additions are two Land & Water Reserves on land owned by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County; the 917.67 acre Bobolink Meadow LWR, and the 221.12 acre Jens Jensen Deer Grove Grasslands and Woods LWR. In a marked change from 2016 when almost 2/3 of the new sites were protected by nonprofit land trusts, in 2017 8% of the new Preserves/Reserves were dedicated/registered by private individuals (one of those sites was already registered as a Land & Water Reserve, being dedicated in 2017 as a higher quality Nature Preserve), and the remaining 92% by local governments.



Incidentally, 2017 saw the release of a [biography](#) of George Fell, the creator and, for decades after, builder and leader of the Illinois Nature Preserves system (he also for all intents and purposes created The Nature Conservancy). The short book does an exceptional job exploring the history and early years of the INPC, including its legislative inception, atypical legal structure, and early decades. I was quite surprised not only by how much I learned in reading the work, but also by the sheer number of what I discovered were my misconceptions about the Commission’s history and purpose. No hagiography, the book also does an excellent job exploring the life of its complicated protagonist, and I highly recommend it to just about anyone whose professional or personal interests find them reading this letter each year.

- **Lake County Forest Preserve District**

- 0.45 acres of wooded high quality wetlands as an addition to the 351 acre Duck Farm Forest Preserve in the north central area of the County. The property was acquired via... the annual tax sale! Yes, tax sales, a phrase so boring that half of those reading this have already moved on to the next bullet. To those who’ve stayed with me, don’t let those who’ve left know, but the joke’s on them, because tax sales are a fantastic way to pick up small, useful parcels on the cheap. By paying (i.e. ‘purchasing’) unpaid property taxes on a property, both governments and land trusts can acquire the land for only the cost of said taxes should the landowner fail to pay what is owed for a period of three years. If your organization isn’t participating in the annual tax sale conducted by the County/Counties in which you operate, you’re really missing out on an underused yet great tool... as the successes enjoyed by TLC and TNC in using this tool just this year alone amply demonstrate.



- **Macon County Conservation District**

- A 90.5 acre addition to the 523 acre Friends Creek Conservation Area, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Located in the County’s northeast, the preserve is a mix of forest, meadow, and tallgrass prairie, through which flows the waterway. The addition contains over a mile of the stream, buffered on both sides by savanna and meadow. A farmstead and agricultural fields buffer the creek, which flows east and south into the rest of the preserve. The buildings will be removed and the land restored to savanna and prairie. Restoration activities began this past fall, and are projected to take two years to complete.



- **McHenry County Conservation District**

- 155.1 acres in northwestern McHenry County, northeast of the City of Harvard, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Part of the same wetland complex, and same project, as the Ducks Unlimited site described earlier in this letter, the property is the first piece of a planned greenway along Alden Creek; Monastery Marsh. Working with DU, the District aims to recreate an expansive shallow water marsh within the drainage basin occupied by the properties (and is exploring opportunities to connect the two parcels in the future to further facilitate this work), within which it can adjust water levels as needed. The eastern extent of the new preserve contains a tall hill, providing a future overlook of the restored basin.



Located within the Nippersink Creek Headwaters subwatershed, Alden Creek merges with two other tributary streams just under two miles to the east of the new property to form the eponymous waterway. Nippersink Creek is an ecological gem of McHenry County, and the source of the wetlands that form many of the major landscapes of the nearby Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. Indeed, the Refuge’s boundaries are heavily influenced by the route of the stream, making the protection and restoration (via nutrient reduction and water storage) of the river’s headwaters of significant value.

- A 70.0 acre (~73 gross acres) conservation easement in northern McHenry County, just north of Illinois Route 173. Adjacent to an adjunct parcel of the District’s Alden Sedge Meadow preserve and a small easement held by The Land Conservancy of McHenry County (the latter demarcated in blue on the attached map), the property lies immediately northeast of the marsh complex described in the previous two paragraphs, and just to the west of the acquisition boundaries of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. ~23 acres of oak-hickory woodland are interspersed between agricultural fields, with a channelized portion of





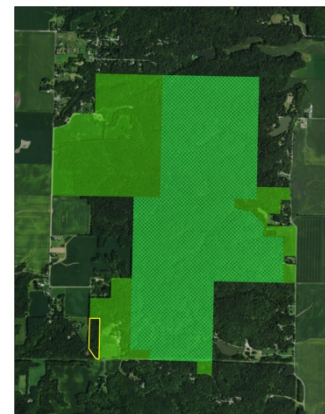
Nippersink Creek flowing through the southern reaches of the property. The land is currently being restored by its owners; noted conservationists who have been working in this field for decades. They have been clearing brush, engaging in weed control, and have seeded one of the agricultural fields to prairie, while recent burning has revealed a sedge meadow over part of the property. The property is a fine addition to a growing macrosite with the added benefit of enabling improved management of Nippersink Creek, the County's most ecologically prominent waterway.

- A 0.27 acre housing lot along the western bank of Nippersink Creek in northeastern McHenry County, at the northwest corner of the MCCD's 330.9 acre Nippersink Canoe Base. While the last two properties discussed above lay along tributaries that feed into the creek, this parcel lies near its eastern terminus into the Chain O' Lakes. Though small, the heavily wooded parcel is part of an Advanced Identification Wetland which covers most of the wooded area between Wilmot Road in the west and the waterway in the east. The lot was acquired via the purchase of unpaid property taxes, in common with a number of other parcels highlighted in this letter. The District has long made use of this resource to expand its preserves lying along major rivers, which are often abutted by undevelopable properties that private landowners choose to abandon.



- **Pleasure Driveway and Park District of Peoria**

- 8.984 heavily wooded acres acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** as an addition to the 943 acre Singing Woods, which itself is adjacent to a 156 acre property also owned by the Park District. As part of this project, the Park District will register an additional 31 acres of Singing Woods, including the new addition as Nature Preserve, 709 acres of which are already dedicated (identified with diagonal hash marks on the adjacent map). The new property lies along Singing Hills Road and is bordered on two sides by the existing Preserve, squaring off the boundary and also buffers the Tawny Oaks environmental center immediately to the east.



### ***Natural Areas Restoration and Management***

As I've written in previous years, although it's not practical to detail each of the many restoration and management projects (and the initiatives that support that work) on privately and publicly owned conservation sites around the state, there are once again a number of impressive or emblematic endeavors that stand out for their scale or uniqueness.

- **Commonwealth Edison**, working with the **Forest Preserve District of Will County** removed, *by air*, ~150 power distribution utility poles in Lockport Prairie and on the adjacent ComEd-owned

land. Lockport Prairie contains a 19 acre dolomite prairie and is the home of a population of the Hine's emerald dragonflies, a federally endangered species that I know is super important not because I'm a biologist, but because upon graduation one of my first jobs was sorting through grant applications that my boss had to review as an advisor to a federal grant program, and something like a quarter of all said applications promised to restore or enhance this critter's habitat. All joking aside, there are [apparently](#) only ~100 to 300 adult dragonflies remaining in the state, making this project of substantial importance. The distribution poles were cut off at ground level while tethered to a ~~black~~ helicopter. As each pole was cut, it was carried off to avoid disturbing the prairie, rather than being allowed to fall to the ground. Read those last two sentences again, and then ask yourself if you can think of any other project akin to this one, anywhere in Illinois, ever.

A replacement distribution/transmission line has been built nearby along the Route 53 ROW directly west of the prairie, providing ComEd with superior access in that for the first time in decades, the utility's staff can actually drive out to towers or lines that need maintenance. With the poles removed, the Forest Preserve District will move to begin a \$15M [erosion control project](#) that will include wetland restoration (also involving drain tile disablement) and invasive species mitigation. In addition to the Hine's, the prairie is home to the federally endangered leafy prairie clover, federally threatened lakeside daisy, and nine state endangered flora and fauna, including everyone's perennial favorite Blanding's turtle.

- The **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County** raised and released 9,000 native freshwater mussels from three species; the fat mucket mussel, plain pocketbook mussel, and the white heelsplitter mussel into the West Branch of the DuPage River. Released along a 13 mile stretch of the river between the cities of Warrenville and Naperville over the course of six months from late April through October, once grown the mussels will collectively filter over 160,000 gallons of water a day. The release was the culmination of a years-long project. The Forest Preserve District preceded the introduction by working with the US EPA and the County Stormwater Management Commission to prepare the river by creating habitat and reducing siltation, all while [raising](#) the mussels over 2 ½ years at the District's Urban Stream Research Center in the Blackwell Forest Preserve. A very innovative project and, to the best of my knowledge, unique in not only the region but the entire state.
- The **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** has launched a new [web map](#) in partnership with the Prairie State Conservation Coalition that documents all known prescribed fires conducted in Illinois over the last two burn seasons (July 1 to June 30). The Council has partnered with local, state, and federal officials and nonprofit land trusts to compile and publish the database, which will be continually updated as new burns are conducted. In just the 2016-2017 season, ~34,500 acres went under the flame. This project is the first to systematically record such burns. The database will provide researchers and land managers with a comprehensive record with which to assess the effects of burning on restoration and management activities, while the web map provides all interested parties with an easily utilized tool that enables the quick identification of any and all burns over the years anywhere in the state. If you know of any projects not currently included in the app, [email](#) the Council with the information (or better yet the data) and they'll get 'em integrated right in.
- A newly published [study](#) in the journal *Environmental Microbiology* (yes, *the* journal *Environmental Microbiology*!) led by **Northern Illinois University** has found that the prairie

restoration at The Nature Conservancy's Nachusa Grasslands has unintentionally been far more foundationally effective than expected. Over the course of 2014, scientists from the University sampled soil from sites at the preserve that had been undergoing restoration for different periods of time; 1, 2, 3, 13, and 27 years, respectively, along with soil from nearby agricultural fields and prairie remnants to use as bases for comparison. The results show that the soil microbiome has recovered with unexpected speed.

The older prairie restorations have soil communities that "closely resemble those in untouched prairies". Significant recovery is apparent after three years, while those sites that have been undergoing restoration for a decade or more experience something reasonably approximating full recovery. Interestingly, the microbiomes seem to be substantially impacted by initial restoration activity. The communities found in sites subject to row crop agriculture bear greater resemblance to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year prairie restorations than they do those that have begun restoration more recently. Some phyla of bacteria appear in agricultural soils, decline in abundance in new restorations, then resurge as the restoration site ages.

Those sites that have been undergoing restoration for a decade or more have microbiomes that are strikingly similar to those found in remnant prairies, with the oldest restoration sites showing the greatest similarities to remnant grasslands. In particular, the bacteria from the phylum Verrucomicrobia don't really increase in abundance until the restoration has been ongoing for an extended period of time. More generally, the carbon content of soils increased with the age of the restoration, "resulting in higher [carbon to nitrogen] ratios in older sites".

As the authors write, the restoration work carried out by the Nachusa team has created soil bacterial communities that "mimic undisturbed prairie biodiversity and, presumably, ecosystem functions", and thus that the results have the potential to enable restoration planners to "make management decisions with a goal of supporting soil-driven ecosystem functions". The [full paper](#) is behind a paywall, but is well worth the read. Though unstated, one of the main takeaways I took from the study was an understanding that fully restoring a prairie ecosystem may not be as Sisyphean a task as is often assumed. It follows that while remnant prairies are irreplaceable sources of seed from plant genotypes that have evolved to suit local conditions, prairies restored using these reservoirs of genetic material can, given several decades, exhibit the same depth of biodiversity and ecosystem function as their remnant forebears and progenitors; a possibility I find quite encouraging.

- Part of managing natural areas in such a heavily populated region is ensuring that the state's residents can visit and enjoy Illinois' natural treasures. To that end, the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** launched a new program in 2017 (one of three to be discussed in this section) that awarded \$5,500 grants to support public amenities and events designed to improve public use and enjoyment at 60 natural areas located in 27 Illinois counties. These amenities will include picnic tables, interpretive signage, parking pads, and trails, while supported events will include night hikes, nature presentations, and celebrations. All of the grantees were nonprofit organizations. 23 of the 60 sites are government-owned conservation properties (but that are cared for with the help of the nonprofit partner) while the other 37 grant sites are on land owned directly by the nonprofits.
- **Audubon Great Lakes** is restoring major grassland preserves owned by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and simultaneously expanding the volunteer stewardship base that

maintains such properties. With support from the ***Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation***, Audubon has been restoring Bartel Grassland, Orland Grassland, Spring Creek and, new this year, Schaumburg Road Grassland.

- **The Field Museum's** Keller Science Action Center, in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners created a set of GIS tools to facilitate the [improvement](#) of monarch butterfly habitat in urban environments. At their most basic, the [tools](#) are designed to provide urban and suburban planners with an understanding of the likely number of milkweed stems growing within their municipalities and a projection of the milkweed population under any specified restoration scenario.

The development team estimated milkweed densities in 16 vegetative/land use categories, which were then summarized by U.S. census tract. These analyses provide the estimated current milkweed population for a given area. Users can then specify what percentage of different land use categories will likely be converted into monarch-friendly habitat. For example, perhaps it is thought that 0.5% of single-family housing lots and 3% of riparian lands will be planted with the optimum number of milkweed plants. The tool will then provide an estimated number of stems in the area once the conversion is complete, broken down by census block. An interesting resource that brings quantitative rigor to what's often a qualitatively-based guessing game.

- **The Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** awarded 9 grants in 2017 during the second year of its K-12 Pollinator Schools Grant Program. 6 nonprofit organizations and 3 public schools are installing or have installed native habitat located in 5 Illinois counties. As part of the grant, the schools and/or nature centers and nonprofits commit to using the habitat to teach K-12 students about Illinois native plants and the importance of pollinators; 8,929 students attend the 11 participating schools. Nonprofit grantees included the Barrington Area Conservation Trust, The Conservation Foundation, Friends of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, HeartLands Conservancy, OAI, Inc., and Openlands.
- **The Morton Arboretum** has mapped the current (as of 2010) and historical (as of 1939) distribution of oak ecosystems in northeastern Illinois. This long, detailed and, speaking as someone with some experience in digitizing features on the basis of aerial photography, undoubtedly painstaking project provides a valuable tool to identify prospective areas for oak restoration projects, as well as for those who simply seek to pinpoint current oak ecosystems for either protection or restoration. The Arboretum, working with the Lake County Forest Preserve District, has created an Oak Ecosystem Recovery Plan that will endeavor to stitch together and buffer the region's remaining large (>500 acres) oak woodlands and associated woodland ecosystems on both public and private property while restoring (through management of invasive species which often blanket the understory preventing the growth of new or younger trees) and when feasible expanding these remnant forests.
- **Openlands** has nearly finished the major work at its [Lake Shore Preserve](#) in Lake County as part of the Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration project (another component of which, focused on Lake Forest Open Lands Association's work at McCormick Ravine, was discussed in the 2015 edition of this letter). The project involved stabilizing and restoring the three ravines found on the preserve. This entailed the installation of a wall and other improvements at Bartlett Ravine and bank stabilization improvements in Schenck Ravine including the installation of step pools and plantable walls held in place along the ravine bank through the use of cables



and anchors. This was followed by heavy earth moving and land improvements that further stabilized and restored the area. Complementing these efforts, seeding and planting of native plugs, shrubs, and trees was ongoing throughout the year beginning this past spring, and will continue for the next four or five years. I can assert from personal experience that the entire preserve is sublime; Openlands and its partners have done a fantastic job.

- The **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** awarded 14 nonprofit organizations Community Stewardship grants to benefit the habitat at 18 different natural areas in 12 counties. This was the program's fourth year, though, in a sign of my limited horizon, the first in which I learned of its great work. The grants are structured as challenge grants (something I love to see as the incentive structure both encourages and requires the recipients to continually push themselves); over an 18-month period beginning June 1, the Foundation will match funds raised by the recipients in support of each site 3:1 up to a total of \$21,000 from the Foundation.

Grantees can also receive a \$4,000 payment after logging a total of 400 volunteer hours on the care of the site's habitat and an additional \$2,000 payment for volunteer hours spent on publicizing volunteer opportunities at the site on social media. Lastly, for those sites owned by nonprofit organizations (which include 11 of the 14 grants from this past year), the Foundation will reimburse grantees up to \$5,000 or 80% of the cost of stewardship equipment purchased during the grant period, for a total award of up to \$32,000 to organizations that successfully push themselves. In 2017 grants were awarded to benefit the *Blackmon Parcel* and *Glacial Park* (McHenry County), *Dolton Avenue Prairie* (Cook County), *Wolf Road Prairie* (Cook County), *Garfield Harley Ephemeral Pond & Woods* (Kane County), the *Headwaters* and the *Kelley Property*, both connected to Franklin Creek State Natural Area (Lee County), the *H&B Bremer Wildlife Sanctuary* (Montgomery County), *Espenscheid Forest*, *Indian Gardens and Wohlford Woods Natural Areas* (Stephenson County), the *Sangamon River Corridor Reserve* (Piatt County), *Compartment 1*, *Big Timber of the McCully Heritage Project* (Calhoun County), *Baebler Educational Farm and Natural Area* (Monroe County), *Munz Park Natural Habitat* (Livingston County), *Sand Ridge* (Ogle County), *Funks Grove Land & Water Reserve* (McLean County), and the *Hickory Hollow at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge* (Putnam County).

- **Libertyville Township**, in central Lake County, has completed an extensive restoration project converting 140 acres of mostly agricultural fields to a mosaic of prairie and savanna. Supported by the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** and first mentioned in the 2015 edition of this letter noting the then future project's goals, the restoration work was spread across two sites; both adjacent to dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves. The larger piece of the project, adjacent to the Liberty Prairie Nature Preserve, entailed seeding 84.5 acres of agricultural fields to a high quality and highly diverse mesic and wet mesic prairie seed mix, clearing 19 acres of overgrown copses, old tree lines and invasive shrubs along ridges and riverine corridors with the land then seeded to prairie, and restoring an additional 11.5 acres of agricultural fields to oak-hickory savanna through the [planting](#) of 125 trees incorporating five species of oak and two of hickory (with support from the **Morton Arboretum**), and clearing more invasive shrubs. The second portion of the project was located just to the north; 24 acres of agricultural fields adjacent to the Oak Openings and Almond Marsh Nature Preserves were seeded with the same high quality prairie mix used in the south. Both restored areas were added to the Illinois Nature Preserves system in 2017 as Nature Preserve Buffers, cementing their new roles as integral additions to the high quality natural areas which they adjoin.

- Twenty two bison were born this year at **The Nature Conservancy's** Nachusa Grasslands in Ogle and Lee Counties, taking the three year old herd over the century mark to just over a hundred animals (for those comparing the bison count in this letter to those from previous years, the number of calves from one year don't automatically sum with the bison count from the previous year due to transfers, deaths, miscounts, etc.). 70 miles to the southeast, 18 calves were born this year at the **United States Forest Service's** Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie located just south of Chicago, bringing the two year old herd to 60 bison.

## *Policy & Advocacy*

Nearly all conservation work has at its root a policy decision. The creation of a state conservation department. Legislation permitting Counties to create Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts and the decision of voters to establish the same. The contested decision of a new organization called The Nature Conservancy to both organize by chapter and to build long-term capacity rather than furiously fundraise for individual projects as the need arose. The strange idea that development rights can be separated from the rest of a property. Today's conservation landscape, both physical and organizational, is the result of almost innumerable decisions and campaigns large and small. The work done and decisions made in 2017 have built upon this legacy, and many will have outsized influence on the future course of events for years or even decades to come.

- The **Forest Preserve District of Kane County**, working with **The Conservation Foundation** passed a \$50M referendum. This was an immense accomplishment that required a commensurate amount of effort, and is discussed in detail in a later section of this letter as one of the top three most impressive projects of the year.
- Not to be outdone, **The Prairie State Conservation Coalition**, **Illinois Environmental Council**, **Openlands**, **Vital Lands Network**, and **The Nature Conservancy** successfully pushed legislation that will create a funding vehicle for the Illinois DNR to work with 501(c)3 organizations in the care and restoration of Illinois Nature Preserve dedicated and registered properties. This work is also discussed in detail in the section of the letter devoted to the year's top projects.
- **The Field Museum** engaged in the second phase of its Community-based Conservation program in Pembroke Township and the Village of Hopkins Park, both in southeastern Kankakee Township. With support from the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation**, the Museum's Keller Science Action Center worked with local residents to ascertain how best to pursue both economic development in the area and conservation/restoration of its rare black-oak savanna. The community meetings and subsequent projects have the potential to be of some import, as the area has historically been underdeveloped with a consequent dearth of opportunities for residents.
- **Openlands** launched what has quickly become a very popular [web guide](#) of northeastern Illinois river paddling opportunities, covering over 50 different paths. While a public engagement initiative rather than public policy, this felt like the best place in the letter to discuss the new resource. Each water trail, as the organization appropriately calls them, are categorized by river (or lake, in the case of Lake Michigan). The landing page for each region offers an overview of the river, an interactive map of the entire riverine trail system, and detailed information

regarding each trail section including length, suggested skill level, directions to the launch site(s), and notes on the trail's route and what you'll see. When applicable, the pages also provide information about adjacent preserves and parks that you can visit by coming ashore. All in all, an excellent and, if the sheer volume of use it's received is any indication, long overdue community resource.

- **The Conservation Foundation** has merged with the Green Earth Institute, a nonprofit organic fruit and vegetable farm and educational organization that had leased 49 acres at TCF's McDonald Farm headquarters since 2002. The Institute provided produce to local food pantries along with a Community Supported Agriculture program for members of the local community. In adding the Institute's effective and equally efficient programs and staff to its own, TCF has, in a stroke, become the state's undisputed land trust leader in the growing field of organic agriculture. The merger also reinforces the Foundation's unmatched role in consolidating the fragmented local environmental nonprofit sector, most recently demonstrated last year when the organization reached preliminary agreement for a future merger with a small area land trust.
- **Chicago Wilderness** ceased functioning as an independently staffed organization, and is attempting to transition to more of a volunteer-based alliance of Chicago metropolitan area organizations and governments.
- **Openlands** has taken a powerful step towards consolidating a fragmented and often inefficient land trust sector by integrating Conserve Lake County into its operations. Those who have read last year's letter will recall that I see such efforts as part of the most important structural shift necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the nonprofit conservation sector. As such, it will shock no one to learn that this work is discussed in detail later in the letter as one of the top three projects of the year.
- As obliquely discussed earlier, **The Land Conservancy of McHenry County** (TLC) assumed ownership of both a property and a conservation easement this year that had previously been held by different organizations, while **The Natural Land Institute** has taken on an easement previously held by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation, which this year acquired fee title to the property.

TLC's assumption of the first property's fee title has allowed the previous owner to close down the organization, its mission completed. The consolidation of a fragmented nonprofit space has the potential to lead to real economies of scale in the land trust sector, something I both covered in last year's letter and further discuss in a subsequent section of this letter. TLC is to be commended for taking on the property, to which it can bring significant resources unavailable to a smaller organization.

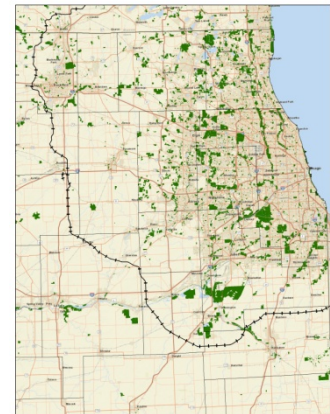
Transferring easements to those that have the resources and/or proximity to more efficiently monitor them makes it possible for each organization to better concentrate on its core geographic areas. While the recent transfer of a JDCF easement to NLI was done to enable the former to acquire the property without the easement coming under the same ownership as the fee (an issue that really should get a lot more attention than it does, as this sort of situation is not all that uncommon statewide), NLI has been without equal over the last decade in rationalizing its own easement holdings, transferring easements located outside of its core



service area to local land trusts, while simultaneously deepening its involvement in northwestern Illinois...as their work described in this year's letter alone attests to!

- The **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** supported the participation of numerous organizations in the Calumet Land Conservation Partnership (CLCP), continuing a program begun in 2013-2014 in partnership with European/Indian steel company ArcelorMittal. The Foundation and company provide general operational support to the members of the CLCP, which have set restoration goals and identified specific restoration projects on which they would jointly engage. Work on the first of those projects began this year, and is expected to continue for some time to come.

- **Openlands** led a successful effort to [defeat](#) a firm's proposed 261-mile tri-state rail line which would have run from La Porte, Indiana to Milton, Wisconsin, swinging south and west around greater Chicagoland before moving north just west of Rockford through Winnebago County. Purposefully skirting the boundaries of Will, Kendall, and Kane Counties (in some locations literally positioned at the county line), Openlands and its allies contended the line would have "pulled our industrial belt out into the middle of our farm fields and taken some of the most beautiful natural resources that we have", in addition to threatening water resources in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. The firm's proposal was rejected by federal regulators in large part due to their failure to prove the line's financial viability. Openlands also continued its efforts, in conjunction with the Environmental Law and Policy Center and supported by the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation**, to ensure that the proposed Illiana tollway near the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie not be revived in any form that might damage the national grassland.



- **Lake Forest Open Lands Association** finalized its sixth conservation development project in the City of Lake Forest in southeastern Lake County. Conservation development, as the name implies, involves clustering residential development on a portion of a property and then permanently protecting the rest of a site's high quality natural areas or utilizing them for other undeveloped uses such as agricultural production. This enables the protection of land in areas where its high cost (often well over \$250K/acre) might otherwise preclude preservation efforts.

LFOA pioneered the use of this tool in Illinois in the 1980s; two of the sites preserved in this manner have since been dedicated into the Illinois Nature Preserves system, so these are *not* properties of limited importance. Once completed, the new development, the HOA-owned portions of which will be required to use native plants for all landscaping, will have preserved 17 acres of high quality wetlands, a small old growth hickory woodland, and a mesic prairie, a portion of which, to my surprise, may actually be unplowed, all of which is part of over 1,200 acres of preserved land in and around the City.

- Not a policy move, but rather a programming note. The **Illinois Historic Preservation Agency** was eliminated this past year via an [Executive Order](#), with all of its staff, functions, and property (with the exception of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, which has become its own agency) folded into the IDNR, where it has become the Historic Preservation Division.

## *And Now For Something Completely Different*

In writing these letters, I make it a *Priority* to craft prose that will sustain the interest of my *Network* of readers. In drawing on the work of organizations throughout the state, I attempt to create a *Resilient* piece that contains insights and information that make it memorable. It's not simply about the projects themselves though. Keeping things from becoming boring or clichéd requires *Sustainable* usage of verbs and nouns so that none are devalued by overuse; consequently two of my least favorite words in the conservation space are "critical" and "unique". Every snowflake may be unique, but every project is not. In fact, most of them are pretty darn similar to one another. You know why? Because they're supposed to be! People repeat what works. Know many times I used that word to describe a project in this novella of a letter? Four. Because, and I can not emphasize this strongly enough, most projects or initiatives are not all that different from their peers. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Which brings us to 'critical'. Oh 'critical', I hate you so. Here is a word that's been so overused as to be rendered meaningless. Any guesses as to how many times it appears in this 19,000+ word piece (apart from in this section)? Zero. Not once. Doesn't show up in any of my previous letters either. Go look! If fate or circumstance ever places me in the position of reviewing grant applications, so help me, readers can significantly boost their chances of approval merely by excising the word from their vocabulary (...this is why I probably will never be asked to review grant applications). I know it'd be hard, but conservationists are an *Adaptive* group, so I've full confidence that new and descriptive verbiage could be deployed in short order!

## *Top 3 Most Awesome Projects*

In two firsts, the year's top projects are all policy related, and all feature work conducted in whole or in part by the nonprofit sector. These three projects have more than that in common; each resulted from years of effort made possible because of the solid and expansive foundations upon which the organizations that made them a reality have been built.

- **The Conservation Foundation** and the **Forest Preserve District of Kane County** successfully proffered a \$50M land acquisition and improvements [referendum](#), which will enable the District to acquire approximately 2,000 acres. ~80% of the funds will be used to expand the District's holdings with the remaining ~\$10M going towards capital improvement projects. The land acquisition efforts, which should increase the District's holdings by a bit under 10%, will be focused on expanding and connecting existing preserves, providing significant opportunities to both expand and buffer a wide variety of habitats; eight of the nine FPDKC acquisitions described earlier in this letter were the first such properties acquired using the proceeds from the referendum.

The Forest Preserve District has spent years building an admirably strong relationship with its constituents, nearly tripling the size of its holdings since passing its first modern-day referendum in 1999, restoring thousands of acres, and building numerous recreational facilities to enable the County's residents to enjoy the multitude of lands that have been permanently preserved through their support.

The Conservation Foundation was *the* driving force behind the referendum's success, both running and managing the entire election campaign. The Foundation conducted polling of voter interests and intentions, developed messaging, and actively campaigned for the referendum's passage, drawing on the experience and expertise of both staff and volunteers. This was the 13th Open Space referendum in the greater Chicagoland area led by the Foundation, and its 13th victory. On that note, I distinctly recall that the first time I ever heard of the Foundation was while I was in undergrad. On election night, several County open space referenda were all meeting with success, and it was explained to me that this "Conservation Foundation" was at the center of just about each and every one of them. Needless to say, I was in awe when I got to meet the staff of this incredible organization a few years later.

Following the latest Kane County referendum (the fifth in less than two decades), TCF, working with its public sector partners, is directly responsible for having raised over \$700 million in Open Space referenda; that comes out to over \$890 million after adjusting for inflation. It's truly a remarkable record from an equally remarkable organization.

- **The Prairie State Conservation Coalition, Illinois Environmental Council, Openlands, Sierra Club, and The Nature Conservancy** led the successful effort to pass the [Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Act](#) in the state legislature. The bill, which was conceived and developed by the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, and written through a partnership of the conservation partners, establishes a grant program through which the Illinois Department of Natural Resources will provide funding to 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations for restoration projects on land dedicated as Illinois Nature Preserves, Nature Preserve Buffers, or Land & Water Reserves.

Conceiving, crafting, promoting, refining, and passing the bill was a multiyear effort, and all parties involved deserve tremendous credit and the thanks of pretty much everyone reading this letter. Beginning in 2018, nonprofits that own or work on dedicated/registered INPC sites will be able to submit grant proposals for work on these properties, with awards being distributed each year. The bill's passage is a testament to the policy expertise of all organizations, which spent many, many days meeting with legislators and testifying before House and Senate committees to explain the purpose and benefits of the legislation; IEC took on an especially demanding role in the process. Most of this letter is devoted to physical sites; it is useful to remember that it's policy work such as that which led to the INAS Act that provides both a framework and resources for the continued care and improvement of these properties.

- **Openlands** has absorbed Conserve Lake County, assuming the latter's programs, land holdings, and conservation easements in a process that will officially be completed at the end of the month. As I discussed last year in this section, folding organizations with limited means or that have completed their primary mission into larger entities that share a geographic or programmatic focus benefits both the enlarged organization and the conservation sector as a whole.

Amalgamating both the operations and assets of two long established entities required great skill and care. Exploring just a single facet of this process, the Illinois conservation sector is well known for using a variety of instruments to reinforce the protection of preserved lands, including fee ownership, conservation easements, deed restrictions, and Nature Preserve dedication to name but a few. Such a system will occasionally lead two organizations to have a legal interest in the same property. Such was the case with Openlands and Conserve Lake



County, where the former held easements on land owned by the latter. Evincing the foresight and experience for which it is well known, Openlands worked with the Barrington Area Conservation Trust, to which the easements were transferred prior to Openlands' assuming title to the fee. As with the easements transferred by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation and the Natural Land Institute discussed earlier in this letter, assigning the development restrictions to a third party prevents a conflict of interest by merging ownership of the fee and easement, thereby maintaining the easement's integrity.

The consolidation of land protection organizations, land trusts or otherwise, is of tremendous value. At a bare minimum it reduces competition for financial resources, eliminates unnecessary redundancies, and gives the consolidator greater economies of scale. I can not overemphasize the value of consolidation; this move by Openlands rightly takes its place among the most important projects of all 2017.

### *Ownership of Navigable Rivers and Lake Beds*

Did you know that the boundary line of a property bisected by or abutting a stream, lake, or river is determined based on a historical tradition beginning with Roman/Byzantine law, continuing through English Common Law, then meandering through federal law on its way to state law? No? Well, you're not alone, if the number of times I receive a question about the ownership of submerged lands every year is any indication.



While the right of the public to use rivers or streams to fish, boat or swim engenders substantial interest and thus case law (and could be the subject of its own dissertation), the ownership of the underlying land is often of interest only to folks who want to build something in the middle of said body of water by anchoring a structure to the bed, to poor benighted souls trying to craft legal descriptions for Illinois Nature Preserves or conservation easements, and to anal retentive GIS map makers of conservation properties, and so near as I can tell is a less explored legal concept. Nonetheless I'm still often asked whether a property line extends to the centerline of a river or stream or whether the line is drawn at the low-water mark (or, relatedly, why I set a boundary where I did in the protected lands database that populates the [I-View](#) web app). The answer, as should surprise absolutely no one, is a

resounding, definitive, and crystal clear “it depends”. And that answer demands a brief dive into the history of water rights. Before beginning, I would like to offer a heartfelt apology to anyone in the legal profession reading this letter, as I’ve little doubt that I will be guilty of more than a few poor interpretations of federal statutes.

The *Institutes of Justinian*, published in 533 and part of the larger *Corpus Juris Civilis* that many of you hopefully remember from your first ancient history course is the earliest reference I know of in western jurisprudence (which underpins the law under which the U.S. operates today) that identified running water on public rivers or streams, among other public goods as, well, a public good. The Byzantines didn’t call it a public good, ‘cause that term wasn’t coined for another 1,400-odd years, but that’s what it was. The *Institutes* made a distinction between public and private bodies of water; remember that, because we’re going to return to the concept shortly. By the by, Emperor Justinian, under whose auspices the work was published and who also did some of the writing gets a lot of the credit, since women typically find only slightly more respect in traditional histories than they did in Harvey Weinstein’s office, but Empress Theodora deserves a wholehearted shout-out for being an equal and, I’d argue, occasionally superior partner in one of the more successful reigns of late Roman antiquity.

A good millennia and a bit later, English Common Law which, as with most other European legal systems was heavily influenced by both Roman law and thought continued the tradition that while most rivers, streams, and lakes are privately owned, certain bodies of water were public; for the English such bodies were/are defined as tidal waters (i.e., the Thames). This idea was extended to navigable waters more generally, as water transport was and remains the most cost efficient and rapid means of transporting goods. The red coats also asserted that the rights to surface water *in general* were tied to the ownership of the inundated land over which it flowed. A’ha! Now we come to the issue of ownership of the underlying property.

The question of ownership of the land underlying waters owned by the public is multifaceted and to explore fully would require both more space than I have here... and also someone who, you know, has an actual legal education. At its most basic though, English Common Law understandably formed the basis of U.S. law. Ownership of the land underlying public bodies of water was refined in the federal [Submerged Lands Act of 1953](#), which held that the individual states held title to all submerged lands lying beneath tidal (out to three miles from the coast) or other navigable bodies of water, such bodies being defined as having been navigable at the time of the country’s independence. Within Illinois, public bodies of water are managed *though not owned* by the Department of Natural Resources. The underlying property, like the waters themselves, are owned in trust for and by the people of the State of Illinois.

So, what is a navigable body of water? The IDNR very helpfully maintains a [list](#) of such waterways that can also be viewed in an interactive online [map](#) (Illinois also includes a few bodies of water that were made navigable at a later date and publicly dedicated for that purpose; specifically, canals such as the Illinois & Michigan Canal. I am uncertain as to whether the state has the legal right to declare that land forever owned by the state in Trust for its people, but that’s an issue not relevant to the larger point). And there you have it. Absent language to the contrary in a property’s deed, the landowner owns to the centerline of any body of water that is not identified as a navigable body, and to the low water mark of any such body that is. Open and shut case, right?

Well...this being Illinois, there’s actually some controversy there. Most states (by which I mean every single other state I’ve ever looked at...Wisconsin, California, Montana, Colorado, etc.) are very clear in

that the beds of both lakes and rivers/streams that have been deemed navigable are publicly owned. Illinois in contrast has a mixed judicial record on the subject. There is some old Illinois case law (more specifically, a [case](#) from 1980) that suggests riparian owners can and/or do own to the centerline of navigable rivers, though not of lakes. However, I had the opportunity to speak with a representative of the Illinois Attorney General's office who held that the state does indeed hold title to the submerged beds of navigable bodies. The state seems to hold the land under the [Public Trust Doctrine](#), and so lacks the right to dispose of the property, even if the government retained the right to regulate the use of the overlying water. This position was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in [Illinois Central Railroad Company v. Illinois](#), an 1883 case in which the court held:

“...That the state holds the title to the lands under the navigable waters of Lake Michigan, within its limits in the same manner that the state holds title to soils under tidewater by the common law we have already shown, and that title necessarily carries with it control over the waters above them, whenever the lands are subjected to use. But it is a title different in character from that which the state holds in lands intended for sale. It is different from the title which the United States hold in the public lands which are open to preemption and sale. It is a title held in trust for the people of the state...”.

The Court *did* include an exception for small parcels devoted to providing access to the body of water in question, before reaffirming that such a conveyance must be limited, holding that:

“...The interest of the people in the navigation of the waters and in commerce over them may be improved in many instances by the erection of wharves, docks, and piers therein, for which purpose the state may grant parcels of the submerged lands; and so long as their disposition is made for such purpose, no valid objections can be made to the grants... But that is a very different doctrine from the one which would sanction the abdication of the general control of the state over lands under the navigable waters of an entire harbor or bay, or of a sea or lake. Such abdication is not consistent with the exercise of that trust which requires the government of the state to preserve such waters for the use of the public. The trust devolving upon the state for the public, and which can only be discharged by the management and control of property in which the public has an interest, cannot be relinquished by a transfer of the property.”

Any of the recipients of this letter who have a legal training (and there fortunately are several such individuals) are both welcomed and requested to chime in to put me in my place on this one, but absent additional evidence or legal precedent, I come down on the side of declaring the beds of all historically navigable bodies of water to be owned in trust by the people of the state of Illinois. And that kids is why the lines are drawn where they are!

### **2016 Revisited**

Once again, a variety of disparate and intriguing acquisitions escaped my knowledge last year. Fortunately, they couldn't and didn't stay obscured forever, enabling me to rectify the vexing omissions. Let us then take a final look at 2016 in all its glory.

- **Ducks Unlimited**
  - As discussed above, 153.6 acres in Woodford County, acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** and a small North American Wetlands



Conservation Act grant, that were deeded to the IDNR this past year for inclusion into the Woodford State Fish and Wildlife Area.

- **Forest Preserve District of Cook County**
  - 6.3 acres along Poplar Creek that connects the 4,335 acre Arthur J. Janura preserve with the small 52 acre Rolling Knolls preserve, and 1.53 acres along 183<sup>rd</sup> Street that that smooths out the southern boundary of a 518.5 acre unnamed preserve.
- **Great Rivers Land Trust**
  - 10.4 acres divided between an agricultural field and established woods, this property forms the northeastern tip of the 90 acre preserve described earlier in this letter. The entire site, as I wrote last year, “runs along a waterway that flows through steep, wooded vistas on its path north and west to the creek”.
- **Heartlands Conservancy**
  - 14.034 acres in western Madison County, north of I-270 and east of Illinois Route 255. Bisected by Cahokia Creek, this small sandy area was historically used for agricultural purposes. It is home to a population of the state threatened Illinois Chorus Frog, a small amphibian that lives almost its entire life in underground burrows, emerging briefly in spring to breed before returning to its subterranean depths.
  - 28.99 acres in three small easements in Clinton County and 42.44 acres in Wayne County. The easements were acquired as part of a federal program and encompass several fields that are or were recently in agricultural production.

### *Changes at the Top*

Half a dozen organizations in all corners of the state saw changes in their leadership or leadership teams in 2017, while a seventh confirmed its acting head as its permanent leader.

- **Emy Brawley** has departed from **Openlands**, where she was a member of the senior leadership team, and next year will join **The Conservation Fund** where she will work on issues throughout the Midwest. Emy’s work on land conservation issues with Openlands and the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, of which she is a past President, has been without peer. Her expertise, knowledge, experience, and dedication make her a priceless addition to any project or initiative; the larger regional conservation sector is very fortunate to be able to now draw upon these skills.
- **Sharon Bush** will take on the role of Executive Director at the **Grand Victoria Foundation** effective January 1, stepping into the shoes of Nancy Fishman, who is retiring after 20 years during which she led the Foundation from its inception to the powerhouse that it is today. Ms. Bush has been the Foundation’s Managing Director, and in that role been instrumental in formulating and executing the Foundation’s many successful initiatives and programs.
- **Carl Daubach** has retired from his position as Executive Director at **Clifftop**, which has declined to fill the position at this time, instead working through the organization’s board. During Carl’s

tenure, Clifftop acquired over 1,000 acres in southwestern Illinois, including the deeply impressive Fogelpole Cave, which has since been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve.

- **Eric Schenck** has assumed the role of Executive Director at the **Illinois Conservation Foundation**, a challenging position for which almost all reading this letter will agree he is *eminently* qualified.
- **Mike Sertle** has taken on the significant task of managing and guiding the many Illinois projects of **Ducks Unlimited**.
- **Ed Stevenson**, who last year was appointed as the Acting Executive Director of the **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**, has had that role upgraded to the *permanent* Executive Director.
- **Tom Vanderpoel**, who for decades was a member of the leadership team of **Citizens for Conservation** (not to mention one of its leading figures and greatest evangelist) passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. While I did not know Mr. Vanderpoel well, I count myself as fortunate that I was able to occasionally draw upon his knowledge and wisdom. What truly struck me about him during our conversations though was his openness, his unrestrained enthusiasm and his singular focus; a man who could and did plan in decades. There are few people in any group or endeavor who are truly irreplaceable. Tom Vanderpoel was one of them, and his passing will long be felt.
- **Mary Ellen Wueller** has assumed the Executive Director's role at the **Champaign County Forest Preserve District** on an interim basis. Ms. Wueller, who is the District's Deputy ED, will serve in the position until a permanent Director is hired.

And with that, I bid you adieu. See you in 2018 for what, even from this early vantage appears likely to be a big year.

— David Holman