



2022 Year in Review

Annual Report of Land Conservation Achievements in Illinois



Center: Nygren Wetland Preserve, Natural Land Institute
Left: Starved Rock Looped Trail, IDNR
Right: Warbler Ridge Conservation Area, Grand Prairie Friends

by David Holman



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.

Our Mission: Empower the conservation land trust community to fulfill the promise that our wild places and open spaces will be preserved for generations to come.

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2022 – Year in Review

2022 is in the history books, and to celebrate the beginning of the new year, I have the pleasure of presenting a not-so-concise summary of *last* year’s many, many projects. In fact, there was so much going on last year that this is the longest edition of this report since, well, ever. So, erm...*you’re welcome?* If that’s not enough, for anyone with an inexplicable hankering for years past, I’ve also [uploaded](#) the reports for 2019–021 with (almost) no post hoc editing! Why nothing earlier? It’s simple really; because I am thin-skinned and that’s as far back as I can go with getting really embarrassed by the formatting and narrative structure I was using at the time.

This annual compendium is once again coming to you in coordination with the good folks at the Prairie State Conservation Coalition. For those of you not familiar with the organization, scroll back up to the previous page for an excellent summary of their work. As I’ve written in years past, it’s the support that the organization brings to bear that helps its member land trusts achieve so much that you need this doorstep-sized report simply to summarize it all. Remember, all opinions, commentary, and asides in said are mine alone, and don’t necessarily reflect those of either PSCC or its members.

With that said, welcome readers old and new to *2022 in Review*. What do you have to look forward to? As usual, something old and something new. This year, over the course of a literal novella’s worth of verbiage, we’ve got:

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Volo Bog (*Creative Commons*)



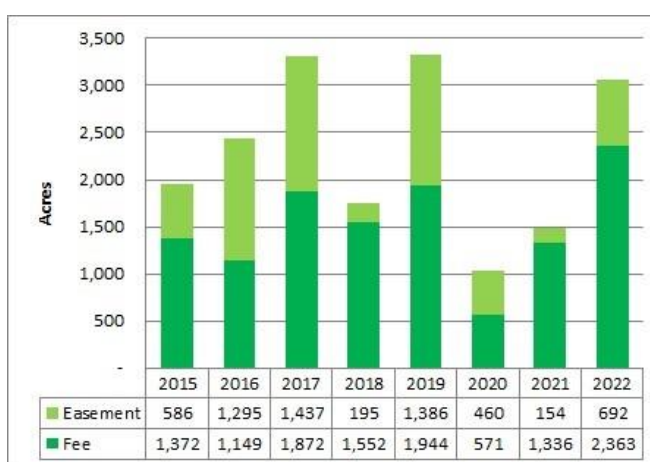
Sunrise over Nippersink Creek (*Ray Mathis*)



Private Sector Land Conservation

I'm well aware there's a risk of my being accused of hyperbole here, but there's no understated way to say it; land conservation in the private sector last year was arguably more impactful than in any since I began tracking these things coming up on a decade ago. There've been years when more was conserved, yes, but those were the result of farmland protection initiatives, or of a one-off gigantic easement. Nothing close to the broad and varied lands we'll soon be exploring. The numbers speak for themselves; last year marked a record number of projects, protecting 3,054.9 acres. That includes 2,363 fee-owned acres – another record.

Before we get to the good stuff, and with a nod to Mr. Clemens' astute observation regarding statistics, pray indulge me with the yearly reminder of how the numbers for that graph you're looking at are derived. While each and every project that closed last year is discussed in the pages within, if an existing protected property was transferred from one conservation organization to another, or an easement placed over land that was already



otherwise protected, it's not included in the graph so as to avoid that most heinous (and common) of crimes – *double-counting*. Relatedly, because land trusts will sometimes purchase land on behalf of a government conservation agency and hold it until the latter has arranged financing, or accept a conservation easement over the property to lower its market value making the purchase more affordable, it wouldn't make sense to give all the credit to one or the other. To accurately represent this, whenever a site changes hands twice within twelve months, or one partner acquires an easement over the land and the other acquires the title, each party gets credit for half of the project's total acreage.

Well, that was boring, but this is not: That wetland in the beautiful photo that closes this page? I visited that site for the first time the day I wrote this, thought the pond was a snow-covered field, and plunged my feet right into freezing water. Fun times. Anyhow, on to the show!



Boloria Meadows (Doug Frey – The Land Conservancy of McHenry County)

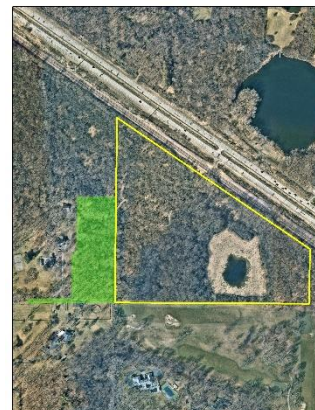
✿ Black Oaks Center

1) Black Oaks Center is a new entry to these pages, but has for over a decade been helping build local, resilient food systems from its base in Kankakee's Pembroke Township. Named after the rare savanna ecosystem that straddles the Illinois/Indiana state line, the Center – with the assistance of *The Conservation Fund* and the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* – took a significant step forward in its mission of supporting the Black farmers and community who call the area home with the acquisition of 38.8 acres of savanna and former farmland. I like this project because it mixes stewardship of both nature and humanity. The savanna on the property will be protected, whilst the old agricultural fields are being returned to production, aiming to offer an easily accessible resource for people in the community, teaching both sustainable farming and sustainable living.



✿ Citizens for Conservation

2) Three years ago in this space I described the founding of a 5 acre preserve bordering the Village of Barrington Hills in southwestern Lake County, noting that “dense woody vegetation anchor soils on steep hillsides, part of a larger ~55-acre woodland complex.” Well, a good chunk of said “larger woodland complex” is now forever protected as the appropriately named Highlands preserve. Acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the dense woodland surrounds a small open water pond and wetland; the 24.88-acre property has long been in the process of reverting to the savanna and wetland community that flourished prior to being drained and cleared for agriculture. As an aside, the two adjoining preserves are exemplars of the Barrington Greenway Initiative, which aims to establish a coherent greenway stretching from southwestern Lake to northwestern Cook County that offers ecological and recreational benefits to the local community in equal measure.



A restored savanna; the kind of landscape we have to look forward to once work at the site is complete. (Diana Krug)

3) There was, at least in my mind, no question that a 239.2-acre horse farm along one of the most heavily used east/west thoroughfares in all the northern suburbs would one day be developed, be it into residential communities or commercial real estate. It was a foregone conclusion. It was inevitable. Until it wasn't. The longtime owners of this scenic land had a vision – a vision that the venerable Hill 'N Dale *Farm* be transformed into the Hill 'N Dale *Preserve*. And working with CFC and the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** (ICECF), that vision is now reality.



The challenge I always have with any project like this is simple; where to begin? Well, let's start with Spring Creek.

This tributary of the Fox River flows through the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's 3,862-acre Spring Lake Preserve before shortly thereafter entering the erstwhile farm, bisecting it in two. Home to the state-threatened Slippershell Mussel, the waterway meanders over three-quarters of a mile through the site on its way to the Fox a few miles to the north. Spring Creek has been the focus of extensive restoration *and* protection efforts over the last decade, with the new preserve positioned both up



and downstream of riverine conservation easements held by another area land trust. With additional support from the ICECF in the form of a Wetland Conservation Grant, Citizens will restore the entire 4,100 linear feet of the stream and its environs to the vibrant wetland community that characterized the land in centuries past.

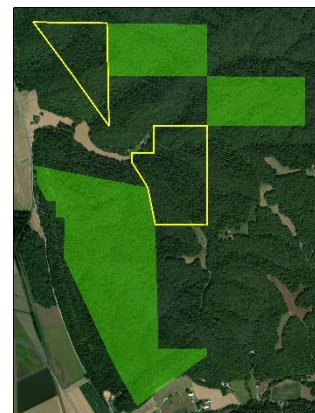
The "Before" photo. I'm legitimately psyched for the "After."

(David Holman)

Plans for the rest of the property – located at the southeastern tip of McHenry County – are equally ambitious. Most of the surroundings will be restored to a mix of prairie, wetland, and savanna – again representative of a site that lay at the intersection of the great prairies of the Midwest and the hardwood forests of the north and east. Residents and visitors alike are in for a special treat, as the land opposite the southern boundary – across the aforementioned major thoroughfare – is itself being restored to a prairie/savanna by a neighboring land trust, meaning that in a few decades time the drive will be scenic indeed. To top everything off, several of the excellently constructed and maintained buildings on the site will be retained and repurposed, some to facilitate restoration and management of the property and others to welcome visitors old and young alike. What's the executive summary? Simple. This is an *awesome* project in the truest sense of that word.

✿ Clifftop

4) Atop the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River floodplain in Monroe County is a mosaic of hill prairies and limestone glades, upland forest and steep cliffs. Home to rare flora and fauna, these are Clifftop's White Rock Preserves – the first land to be protected by the then newly formed group over a decade ago. You'll note I used the plural there, and that's for good reason; the two sites – both enrolled with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission – are separated by about half a mile. Or rather, they *were* separated. A deeply wooded 100.6-acre parcel, acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, has connected the two into a single unified whole, bringing with it all of the attendant benefits that accrue to large, unbroken protected lands.



Ah, but that's not all. Continuing with the theme of bringing things together, this was but one half of a larger land protection project. The second parcel is equally exciting, albeit for a different reason. These 54.2 acres are adjacent to the western boundary of the White Rock L&WR, and part of the same forest complex. In addition to hosting two limestone glades that are now in the process of being restored, the property also holds



White Rock Overlook – Prairie Rattlesnake Glade (Shane Kellogg - Timber Mission)

the distinction of being the first piece of this vibrant woodland to have been permanently protected, being registered as an Illinois Land & Water Reserve a full decade prior to Clifftop's establishment of the White Rock preserves. With its purchase, the two Reserves can now be managed as a unified whole.

✿ Ducks Unlimited

5) To the north and west, Horseshoe Lake – Alexander State Fish & Wildlife Area. To the south and east, the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge and the Cache River as it flows into the Mississippi. I learned of the project literally *the day* I was endeavoring to finish this report, and am glad I did. Situated at the southern tip of the state in Alexander County, this 63.12-acre property is quite literally surrounded by publicly owned preserves and major waterways. And that's exactly what made it so appealing to as broad a cross-section of the Illinois conservation community as you're likely to ever find on a single project. With support from ***Friends of the Cache River Watershed***, DU acquired title to the land



immediately following its enrollment as a Wetlands Reserve Easement – part of the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. This was done to reduce the value of the land, making its purchase more affordable (since easement and are so intimately tied together, I’ll won’t repeat this description in the Public Sector section of the report about fifty pages for now. You’re welcome).

The Service’s involvement in the property didn’t end with the land’s acquisition, nor did DU pat itself on the back for a job well done and move on. No, with funding from the federal agency, this past fall Ducks Unlimited had over 12,000 cubic yards of fill excavated from the site to recreate a slough that had been filled and leveled over the many decades the land was under the plough. The property will next be planted to native bottomland hardwoods. Once restoration has been completed, the entire site will be transferred later this year to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for incorporation into the adjacent National Wildlife Refuge. Like I said, this one involved just about everybody in the region. Amazing what can be done when like-minded organizations with diverse, complementary skill sets collaborate on a common goal. Who knew, right?



Beautiful photo of the property definitely **not** added at the last minute to keep my formatting of this section from breaking (*Ducks Unlimited*)

✿ Franklin Creek Conservation Association

6) Very few can lay claim to being the driving force behind the creation of an entire State Natural Area. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, that rarified list consists of precisely...one name: The Franklin Creek Conservation Association. The Association was a powerful advocate for what in 1982 became the State Natural Area of the same name. Adding land protection in the early 2000s to their already burgeoning portfolio of work, they’ve has since acquired numerous properties surrounding the SNA, with most subsequently sold or destined for sale to the Department of Natural Resources for incorporation into the state property.



So. So, I shouldn't have been surprised upon learning that the Association once again expanded this natural refuge and historical treasure, and yet I was. Because the 79.5 most agricultural acres acquired last year with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** is their largest project by far since I've been writing these reports. Located on the western side of the SNA – another first – the property will eventually extend the state land to and anchor the preserve on Robbins Road, and as an added bonus is only a quarter mile south of the Nachusa Grasslands, opening the potential to materially improve the connectivity of these two stellar preserves.

✿ Grand Prairie Friends

7) A lot of pioneer cemeteries in the Great Plains states have something of a dichotomous nature, being places of not only death but vibrant life, and I'm not talking about the eternal kind. Rather, it's because the whole "resting place of the departed" doesn't square too well with "we're gonna plough and tile every inch of this place", and so these isolated pockets of land host some of the finest prairie remnants in the country – plant communities that simply [can't be matched](#) by a restoration, no matter how skillfully conducted.

Prospect Cemetery is one such prairie. Found south of the City of Paxton, the first cemetery in Ford County is largely



Prospect Cemetery (Sarah Livesay)



More Prospect Cemetery goodness (Sarah Livesay)



covered by remnant mesic black soil prairie, offset by a black oak grove in the northeast. The land's significance was realized early on, being dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve in 1976. Grand Prairie Friends has stewarded the 4.7-acre property for many years, and has now assumed ownership of what is in every sense of the word an irreplaceable piece of the state's – and the nation's – history.



✿ Great Rivers Land Trust

8) I present to you the most oddly shaped conservation easement of the year, with so many twists and turns that for the first time ever I went with a solid fill on the map in place of an outline as a public health service to keep anyone from going cross-eyed as they try to figure it out. So what's the story here? As can be expected whenever Great Rivers is involved, it's innovative in the truest sense of the word.



The entire project is centered around bats. Specifically, the



endangered Indiana bat and its threatened Northern Long-eared cousin. A mitigation firm that has a specialty in restoring the habitat of these aerial mammals will work with the landowner to markedly improve the ability of the woodland that covers the entire 101.4-acre easement area in eastern Adams County, while GRLT will ensure that work is forever retained, providing a home for these diminutive winged insect catchers. With many of the areas of the property excluded from the easement having been retired from agricultural production through the federal/state Conservation Reserve Program and so in the process of being restored, the easement's habitat value is enhanced still further.

Prime bat habitat (*Alley Ringhausen*)

9) Shady Oaks is an 11.25 acre preserve not far from the banks of the Mississippi in the Village of Godfrey, and as you can see it was expanded by five acres this past year... Bet you thought at this point I was going to eat space by talking



Oaks providing shade (*Alley Ringhausen*)

about the history of the preserve, or by offering some bromide about how added depth offers improved habitat opportunities. Look, it's five acres; it'd be a pretty big stretch to call that a tremendous boon to local wildlife. Fauna, no. But flora? Flora, yes. Because here's the thing. The property hosts an intact floodplain forest, and one that, quite unusually for southern Illinois, is composed not of softwood trees, but an eclectic mix of hardwoods. Swamp white, pin, bur, and white oaks mix with hickories and native river birch to create a striking forest scene that the Trust will preserve for all generations to come.



10) What we have here is another site where you'd be perfectly justified in expecting me to wax lyrical about the dense forest or some other readily observed physical feature of this 34.37-acre (36.55 gross acres) site that sits less than half a mile west of the property we just discussed. After all, it's not like that'd be an unprecedented approach within these voluminous pages. But nope! The preserve – and this piece – are all about one thing: the Timber Rattlesnake. Make that the *State Threatened* Timber Rattlesnake. The venomous reptile is all over the property, acquired with the support of ***The Conservation Fund***. And I don't mean any of that mealy-mouthed “the property provides potential habitat for so-and-so” stuff. The snakes have been tracked via radio telemetry, slithering to and fro. The distribution map is really quite the visual feast, with a multitude of many colored dots denoting the snake's presence marching across the screen. Protecting that established range is thus of significant value, and I for one am as grateful as I was surprised to see such a directed, immediately impactful conservation project.



Watch your step... (*Alley Ringhausen*)

A nice bonus here concerns the neighbors, or more specifically one big neighbor. If you take a gander at the map at right, or even view the property in a wider geographic context in something like I-View, it looks like it's sitting in a pretty lonely place, conservation-wise. What you're not seeing though is the fact that Principia College owns most of the forest to the south and west. Not immediately adjacent to the preserve, but pretty much everything else, which makes this not the first piece of a new habitat protection initiative, but rather part of a larger and quite successful whole.

✿ Green Earth

11) It's with great pleasure that I introduce you, my readers, to Green Earth Inc. While this is the first time the organization has appeared in these pages, the Carbondale-based land trust is one of the oldest in the state. Serving the city's residents for almost 50 years, GE last year added a seventh property to its popular network of preserves. The 3.7-acre Stan Harris Jr. Prairie on the northern outskirts of the city is easy to miss if you're not looking, but to do so would be your loss. The prairie has been *hand-tended* by its owner – a former Green Earth board member who generously donated the land – for many, many years, as even a quick visit to the land will make immediately clear.



✿ Heartlands Conservancy

12-14) I can sometimes be a teeny, tiny bit verbose. Hard to believe, I know, but it's true! In the interest of economizing for once on word count and also because there's a definite theme to Heartlands' work last year, I'm going to discuss three disparately but related easements in Madison, Monroe, and Clinton Counties. What do these projects have in common? Foolish question, I know. They're all located in counties named after men who ran for the Presidency in the 1810s, of course. But also, less importantly, each is the site of a wetland mitigation project – restoring previously drained lands to their natural condition to compensate for the necessary impairment of other nearby wetlands as a result of the land's development.



Clockwise from the top of the above collage, we begin about five miles outside the city of Edwardsville in Madison County. Taking in 70.07 acres astride both banks of a channelized portion Silver Creek (a tributary of the Kaskaskia River), the easement both preserves the floodplain and provides space for stormwater capture, in addition to the environmental benefits that'll accrue from the bank's creation. Next up, we journey to southern Monroe County on the Mississippi River plain. This 74.4-acre site is in good company, adjacent or in close proximity as it is to three existing easements taking in a whopping 509.3 acres held by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to preserve and restore – you guessed it – the area's wetlands. Rounding things out, we move to southern Clinton County less than two miles from the aforementioned Kaskaskia River, where the first of what will be a series of easements (so join me again in this space next year) protected 16.8 acres adjacent to a small existing Heartlands easement acquired in 2016 as part of a federal program. And that's a wrap. Two paragraphs to describe three projects; that's not bad!

✿ Illinois Audubon Society

15) In 1970, two intrepid ecologists were tasked by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission with nothing less than surveying the entirety of Lee County, identifying and detailing its remnant natural areas. The result was A Lee County Natural Area Survey; a carefully researched compendium showcasing natural remnants – prairies, wetlands and woodlands – deserving of permanent protection that has guided land protection work in the County ever since. To my knowledge the only document of its kind in the state, a half century later this exceptional guide was updated by the Lee County Natural Area Guardians to reflect the many changes to the landscape over the preceding fifty years.



The updated survey is divided into three sections; major and minor remnants that were first identified during the Nixon administration, and 'deserving remnants' that were discovered in the intervening decades. All were then prioritized into 18 ranked sites;

some hundreds of acres in size made up of multiple parcels, others small, isolated ecological gems...Guess what just happened to the site ranked #1?

Purchased with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the first thing anyone visiting or passing the 132-acre Preserve south of the City of Amboy will notice is the tall Queen of the Prairie growing along the road right-of-way and extending into the adjacent wetland; a wetland added to the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory in the early years of the century. The site is home to a mosaic of wetland, sedge meadow and sand, open growth bur oak woodlands and agricultural fields. As the Natural Area Survey makes clear, it's an exceptional addition to the protected lands of Lee County.



The star of the show (Deb Carey)



Baltimore Checkerspot (Bill Handel)

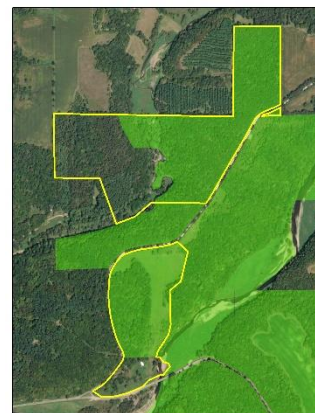
16) I would be in no way surprised if future ornithological historians pinpointed the early 21st century as one of the pivot points in the recovery of Illinois' illustrious and once nearly extinct population of [greater prairie-chickens](#). Most of my recent annual reports have included a piece on the Illinois DNR's Prairie Ridge State Natural Areas in Jasper and Marion Counties, and this year is no different. And that's the key. See, thing is, the grassland loving Prairie Chicken has twice nearly been extirpated from the Prairie State, and both times lack of habitat played a significant role. It's for that reason the State Natural Areas are of such import, and why I'm particularly stoked about an addition last year to IAS' holdings adjacent to the Jasper County preserve.



This 76.5-acre tract, again acquired in partnership with the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, is surrounded on three sides by property owned by the Society and the State (pretty much all of which, incidentally, is enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system), with additional restored lands lying to the north. It thus begins to close a significant donut hole in the middle of the site. Because the bird requires *contiguous* prairie in order to truly thrive, transforming the disjointed preserve into a cohesive whole is unusually valuable – value that arguably makes this one of the more important land protection projects of the year.

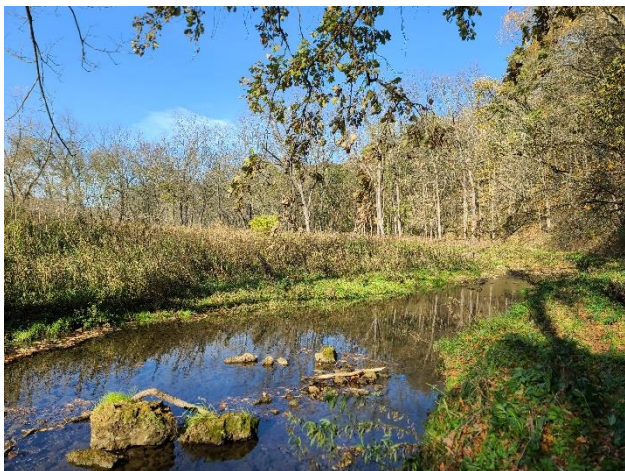
✿ Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

17) Apple River Canyon has gotten a fair amount of attention in these pages over the last few years. That's in large part due to the efforts of the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation, which continued that fine tradition in 2022 with the creation of the Canyon Camp Preserve buffering the 2,020-acre Apple River Canyon State Park. A mixture of forest and grassland, a portion of which borders the river, the site... .. yeah, yeah, sounds like same old, same old, right? Well, it's not. Because this is some ecologically valuable real estate here people, as demonstrated by the fact that 32.8 acres of the 41.2-acre property have been registered as an Illinois Land and Water Reserve; part of a network of registered and dedicated sites up and down the waterway – one of the jewels of Jo Daviess County.



...

You thought I was finished, didn't you? This is JDCF we're talking about here people; if you've been reading this annual missive for any length of time, there are at least two things you know: the Foundation doesn't do anything halfway, and Apple River Canyon



Canyon Camp along the Apple River (*Jim Johannsen*)

has been a focal point of their work for years. So it should surprise no one that following up on the initial acquisition, the Foundation further expanded the Preserve, this time supported by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, with the purchase of another 96.9 acres, 58.6 of which are similarly registered as part of the same Land and Water Reserve stretching across the property I discussed above. And with *that* this project is done. For this year at least!



Apple River Canyon in the late fall (*Jim Johannsen*)

18) At the turn of the 20th century, an amateur archaeologist documented over 50 ceremonial mounds at what is now the Casper Bluff Land & Water Reserve overlooking the Mississippi River. Constructed between 700 and 1000 C.E. by the Woodland Culture, both the archeological and historical treasures of the property were long stewarded by a committed husband and wife duo who, fifteen years ago, sold much of the land to the Foundation to ensure its permanent protection.



That would mark a well-earned dénouement in the story of most, but here it was but another chapter. They continued to steward an adjacent 27.83 acres, restoring the former agricultural field and cattle



Seeding at Casper Bluff (Lynn Werner)

pasture to native prairie. Partnering once again with the Foundation, this vibrant grassland has now been added to the preserve, creating an inseparable whole. Protection of the land was very much a team effort, with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, *Ducks Unlimited* via a grant from the USFWS, the Northwest Illinois chapter of *The Prairie Enthusiasts* and, vitally, a bargain sale from the landowners.

19) Drive a few miles north of the City of Galena, deep in the Driftless Area untouched by the glaciers that had ground down the rest of the state by the time they retreated over 13,000 years ago and you'll find forested hillsides that open on to fertile fields, all of which is forever protected by the 67.1-acre Bedford Hollow conservation easement. Dry-mesic and mesic upland forest dominate the hillsides, but the star of that particular show is a dolomite hill prairie – a feature for which the word 'rare' is something of an [understatement](#). Sedge meadow, a dry-mesic prairie restoration and small streams round out the ecological panoply, but that's only part of the story.



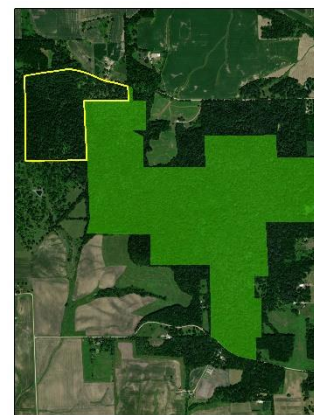
Eagle-eyed readers will have noticed that I gave the name of the easement a few lines up. Why'd I do that? It's not named after the grantors, though it is named *by* the grantors; named in honor of Ms. Anne Wenner (née Bedford) who, in 1854 with her husband Charles built the eponymous Charles Wenner House in the middle of the property. This stone farmhouse has been through a lot; by the time the current owners purchased the land in the 1980s, it had been gutted and converted to a corn crib. Carefully and methodically rehabilitating the building over the course of years, the

structure has been so fully restored to its former splendor that it's now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. To ensure the house enjoys the same dedicated protection as does the land surrounding it, the owners paired their grant of a conservation easement to the Foundation with one of historic preservation over the house to [Landmark Illinois](#) – a nonprofit that works to preserve and restore the state's architectural history. Pairing the preservation of history with that of the natural world upon which it played out is, in a word, awesome.

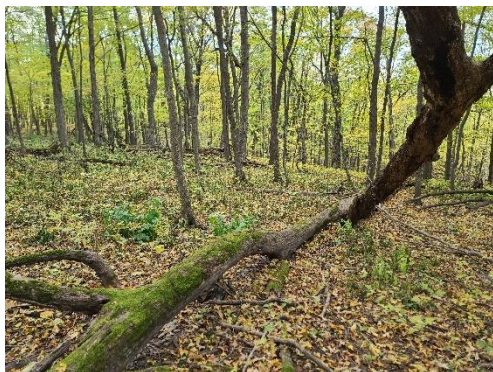


The famous house! (*Jim Johannsen*)

20) Ward's Grove State Natural Area is something of a forested island in a sea of agriculture. Nice, but that wouldn't afford the mix of mesic and dry-mesic forest special consideration on its own. No, it's the many years of restoration and management that give the land distinction and led to its being dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve over 35 years ago. With a mature understory and unbroken canopy, the property offers habitat for a variety of birds that have a tad more sensitive habitat requirements than the sparrows flitting about in your backyard.



As returning readers will recall, the “unbroken canopy” thing



Look Mom, no buckthorn. (*Jim Johannsen*)

is key here, and that's where JDCF comes in. With the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, they've acquired 71.2 acres off equally forested land – all identified as high quality woodland in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory – off of the state property's northwest side, expanding the protected forest and in so doing helping ensure those aforementioned avian neighbors of ours can continue to call the forest home.

21) I toss around the word “generous” on a not infrequent basis in these pages, and when I do it’s always the right choice, for what better word in the language is there to describe those who donate their land – be it easement or fee title – for the benefit of the public or the natural world? The problem comes when there’s a need to describe someone whose dedication and commitment is on a whole different level. And that’s precisely what I face here. Call it a deficit of superlatives.



A brief interlude is in order. In the late 1980s, a pioneer in Illinois conservation purchased what she succinctly described as “the most run-down farm in the whole County.” Over the next thirty plus years, the land was restored in the truest sense of that word to prairie (or rather, the maintenance of a small remnant as it happens, which makes this even more exciting), grassland, forest and wetland – all managed as a wild bird sanctuary. In 2019, the owner donated an easement over the entire 479.5-acre (487.993 gross acres) property to JDCF. This was on top of a 2017 donation of an adjacent 406.3 acres.

Last year, those two properties were unified once again, this time under the ownership of the Foundation, with the conservation easement passing to the Natural Land Institute. The combined 885.8-acre Big Sky Nature Reserve has further been endowed by the donor to ensure that JDCF can continue the multidecade work that has turned these lands into a sanctuary not only for birds, but for mammals and fish, amphibians and insects alike. It is the work of half a lifetime, and one the Foundation has committed to stewarding for many lifetimes to come.



The name “Big Sky” is certainly no misnomer. (*Jim Johannsen*)

✿ Lake Forest Open Lands Association

22) In the 1990s, Middlefork Savanna was often described as the “crown jewel” of the Lake County Forest Preserve District system, and for good reason. The core of the site is the most ecologically vibrant surviving black soil savanna in Illinois, and 25 acres of *that* have been identified as the highest quality example of the ecosystem in the entire country. It is, dare I say, a legitimately unique* place. That fact hasn’t been lost on a far-sighted husband and wife team, who over almost two decades have protected and restored much of their property lying adjacent to the public preserve. Last year they took on a new challenge; restoring 7.3 acres of buckthorn forest to the savanna that once blanketed the land. With the restoration well under way, they partnered with Lake Forest Open Lands to place the property in a conservation easement, ensuring that the fruits of their labors will benefit man and nature alike for centuries to come. (*Photo credit: LFOA*)



* No, I refuse to use the c-word. I will never use the c-word in this report. If you don’t know what the c-word is, go back and read last year’s report.



✿ Natural Land Institute

23) Sometimes it seems like all the pieces of a puzzle come together...and occasionally they look like actual puzzle pieces. That’s very much the case in an expansive floodplain forest and meadow that NLI has been assembling for years along the curves of the Pecatonica River west of the Village of Rockton in Winnebago County. I’ve had the pleasure of writing about this site – a weaving, winding mix of fee-owned land and conservation easement – a couple times over the years, and this year it all comes together. A 66.8-acre addition of former agricultural fields that were reforested about fifteen years ago and purchased with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** increases the easement to 219.8 acres, while an adjacent new easement granted by the same landowner adds another 16.9 acres to the mix. Paired with over 140 acres of the adjacent fee-owned preserve, we’ve got a cohesive 378.6-acre expanse of forest and floodplain stretching over a mile from north to south.

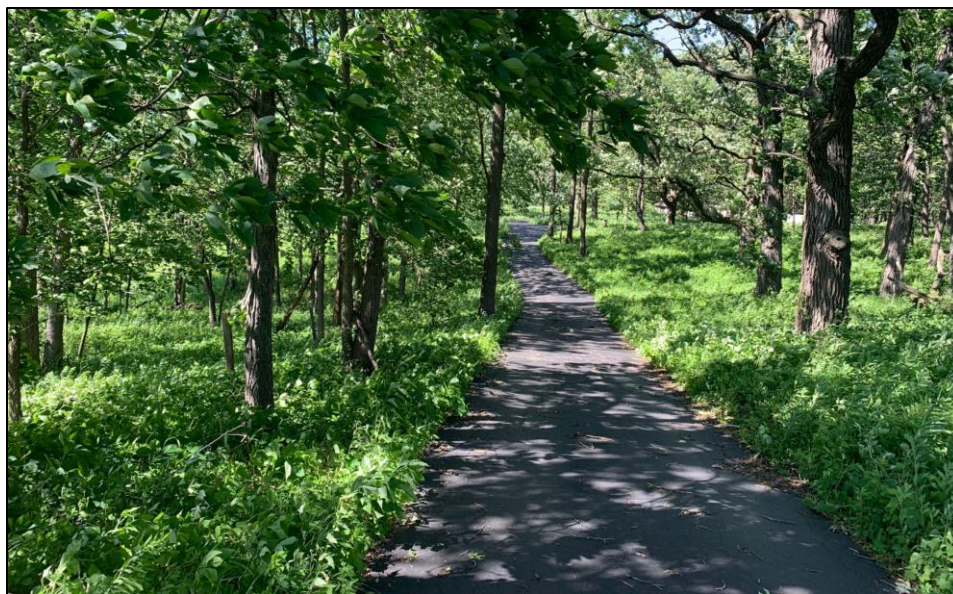


✿ Openlands

24) Spring Creek Prairie – part of the Spring Lake Forest Preserve in northwestern Cook County – is something special. Those of you who've read my ~~rants diatribes~~ *reasoned critiques* of grandiose claims over the years know that I'm not given to making such assertions without an 18-wheeler's worth of evidence to back it up, and here I can do so with ease, as the site contains roughly a dozen acres of Grade A remnant prairie, of which there's only around 2,500 acres known to exist in the state. And it's that prairie that is both buffered and expanded by two conservation easements on neighboring parcels donated by a longtime supporter of Openlands. Together covering 14.13 acres, the northern half



of the property is part of a remnant oak woodland once surrounded by the prairie. That woodland is supremely healthy – reflective of the many decades the landowners have spent restoring and maintaining the land, which, to my eye at least, is *completely devoid* of the three Demons of the Forest – buckthorn, multiflora rose, and garlic mustard. I for one never cease to find it just a bit remarkable to walk through an open forest floor.



What a savanna is *meant* to look like. (*Openlands*)

Ambitions for the southern half of the property match the scale of the north. Historically devoted to pasture, much of the land – which surrounds a homesite and garden/orchard – is actively being restored to prairie, not only buffering but complementing the remnant to the west. I spend a not inconsiderable amount of my time giving Sisyphus a run for his money, battling invasives that literally fly in on the wind. In stark contrast, here the developing prairie benefits from the highest quality (and most locally-sourced) seed imaginable. To say that both remnant and restoration benefit in equal measure is an understatement.

25) These reports wouldn't be complete without an annual reminder of how incredibly, increasingly *outrageously* wrong I was in doubting the potential of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge which, for those just now joining us, I was pretty convinced would be about as successful as Herschel Walker's Senate campaign. It was a true pleasure to be proven wrong yet again last year in the form of 172.3-acres of wetlands, agricultural fields, and woodlands. Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the land – located north of the Village of Woodstock and just south of the McHenry County Conservation District's Queen Anne Prairie Conservation Area – will eventually be deeded to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as an addition to the Refuge.



On the subject of Hackmatack, in the 2020 edition of this annual tome, I wrote of the transfer of a property from Openlands (acquired in 2017) to the FWS, noting that it was adjacent to an existing federally-owned property to the north and a privately held conservation easement to the southeast. I learned this past year that I was *misinformed!* A thin, linear strip of land on the south side of the property was excluded from the purchase, meaning the NWR doesn't *quite* link up with said easement.

26) Let's be blunt for a moment. When it comes to natural areas, the term "HOA-managed" is often a euphemism for "unmanaged, unmitigated ecological disaster zone." Such is not the case with a residential community in the village of Round Lake, located in the middle of Lake County.

The owner of a 38.65-acre tract adjacent to the community felt similarly, leading her to make a most generous donation of the land. A mix of wetlands, oak woodland, a small prairie restoration, and a hidden turf-grassed meadow that's quite scenic if I do say so myself, the HOA will restore the land subject to a conservation easement held by Openlands.

Considering that the former owner lives across the street from the property, the confidence she has in the Association's dedication and ability to manage the land is all the clearer. *(Photo credit: Openlands)*



✿ The Conservation Foundation

27) As longtime readers know, The Conservation Foundation has a matchless history of partnering with the communities of which it's an invaluable part, purchasing properties on behalf of local park districts and departments whilst they assemble the funds needed to take ownership of the land. That tradition was exemplified not a month into the new year, with the acquisition of 5 acres along the Fox River in the city of North Aurora. Originally an industrial site that was abandoned and repurposed as a residential development – only to be abandoned again following the 2008 recession – the property is adjacent to a narrow trail owned by the Fox Valley Park District that links a vast network of riverine parks north and south. The dénouement of this one was a bit unusual; asked by the District to purchase and hold the property until it could fund the land's acquisition, said funding was secured quicker than expected through the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, such that the Foundation purchased the site and then immediately sold it to the Park District but a moment later.

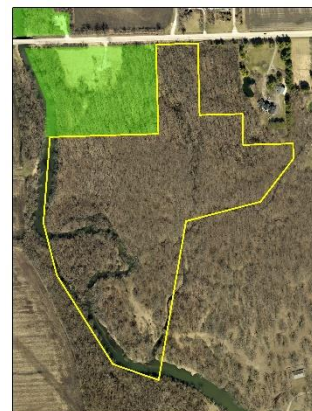


28) There's a trail near my house that I bike with my Dad *at least* once a week from spring through fall. It's great; secluded, yet accessible, and running for dozens of miles. Methodically added to mile by mile over multiple decades, the government agency that built and maintains the path was truly painstakingly diligent in its planning... And yet anyone reading this knows what happens to the best laid plans of both mice *and* men. And so it came to pass that on a wintry day over 30 years ago a trail easement was established, and a few short years later, the long-awaited trail built. Recreational opportunities multiplied, and there was [much rejoicing](#). Thing is, whoever designed the thing wasn't going to be confined by the dictates of The Man, such that the trail eventually busts out of the corridor and meanders through wholly owned private property for something like a tenth of a mile. I honestly wonder if I'm the only one who's ever noticed this.



While my beloved biking trail is a lawsuit waiting to happen, the Lincoln Marsh preserve in DuPage County is just the opposite. Jointly operated by the Wheaton Park District and the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, a portion of one of the site's many trails accidentally veered ever so slightly onto a neighbor's property. Rather than moving the trail (which, and you may not know this, would be kind of expensive) TCF – which has been helping to protect the site for decades – stepped in to purchase the 0.8-acre parcel, which will eventually be integrated into what will then be 150 readily accessible acres of marsh and prairie, woodland and savanna – all in the middle of one of the densest urban agglomerations in the state.

29) Aux Sable Creek is a defining feature of southern Kendall County, with portions of the waterway identified as some of the most diverse and intact in the state. The Kendall County Forest Preserve District's Baker Woods lies immediately downstream of one such stretch, with the portion of the creek that subsequently meanders through the 248-acre preserve itself no stranger to quality. The District has long been working to further enhance the ecological vibrancy of the stream, and TCF has certainly taken notice. With the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the land trust has acquired 37 acres of floodplain forest on the south side of the preserve – along which the creek flows for almost half a mile – land they'll hold until the District has the resources to integrate it into the preserve. This continues the aforementioned theme of TCF being an awesome and literally indispensable partner to local government, something that, it's worth reiterating, they do better than *anyone*.



30) I freely admit I thought we were done with the Lower Fox River for a while. Shows what I know, because after a one year hiatus, we're back in what I'm reasonably certain is the most topographically striking portion of its run, immediately downstream of easement projects I had the pleasure of discussing in 2019 and '20. Only this time we're not talking easements. Nope; the 183.4-acre Belrose Farm is a new fee-owned preserve, taking in over a mile of shoreline. While this likely makes any number of people happy, I rather suspect it pleases no one more so than the good folks at the IDNR and Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, abutting as it does on the north end with the dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve and DNR-owned Lower Fox River-Blake's Landing preserve.



The agricultural fields that give the property its name are largely paired with healthy forest on one side and river on the other. That's all well and good, but from *my* perspective the best part about the preserve is that it has Not Boring geology – something that, as any of my fellow Chicagoland residents can attest to is pretty darned uncommon in this area. Hosting bluffs, a cave, and several canyons, the land has been on the Foundation's radar since the Clinton administration. Given this, you'd be forgiven for assuming its protection was the result of long conversations and careful planning. Well, you'd be wrong.

No, instead, the land was to be sold at auction, a fact which the Foundation was informed of...two weeks before the event. After checking the couch cushions for loose change, at this point most organizations – public or private – would've had to shrug their metaphorical shoulders and move on. Not so TCF, whose record has been proved time and again, building trust and rapport with a multitude of supporters, several of whom were both able and willing to step in. They won the bidding, purchasing the land on the Foundation's behalf. With the support of, among others, the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, TCF was subsequently able to arrange funding to

purchase the land, establishing this fine preserve that I *quite* look forward to visiting in the near future.



This is northeastern *Illinois*! I know; crazy, right? (TCF)

31) The Foundation has been responsible for the protection of a wide variety of landscapes over the years. Heck, this year alone we've touched on streams, trail corridors, parkland, agricultural fields, and forests. Yet they closed the year with what I can say with complete confidence is a new one in the organization's five-decade history – a strip mine – part of the 109.9-acre Harper's Farm acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***.



Why a strip mine you might ask? For starters, it's part of a larger project first discussed in the 2018 edition of this report, adjacent to a 25.3-acre wooded tract along the Illinois River on the eastern edge of the city of Ottawa in LaSalle County donated to TCF in 2018. Earlier in this piece I extolled the Foundation's history of partnering with the communities in which they work, and this property is no exception. Working in partnership with both The Wetlands Initiative and the City, the mine will be restored to the marsh that once blanketed the site, filtering runoff before it can enter the adjacent river. Adjacent woodland will be integrated into the existing preserve, with a winding trail system open to the city's residents, complementing the Foundation's nearby Dayton Bluffs Preserve and mixing ecological restoration with community recreation.

✿ The Conservation Fund

32) I loathe big group meetings. To paraphrase that most skilled scribe of the English tongue, never in the field of human endeavor has so much been said by so many signifying so little. Supporting local agriculture and farmers just getting into the field is one of those subjects where you'll invariably get hours, and hours, and *hours* of talk at conferences and Zoom gatherings that boil down to "gee, someone else should really do something about this." The Conservation Fund is one of those groups that rather than talk lets its actions speak for themselves, and I love it. Case in point is their Working Farms Fund, which last year made its Illinois debut.



The program is quite simple at the highest level; I imagine the elevator pitch is super easy. The Fund works with a farmer who's ready to expand their operation to identify the right farm, purchases said farm, leases the land to the farmer and provides support for the transition, and then ultimately sells them the land subject to an agricultural conservation easement – which has the beneficial effect of reducing the land's purchase price solely to its agricultural value. A 28.24-acre farm and oak woodland bordering the Village of Woodstock in McHenry County is the first of what I think likely to be many such projects. Featuring 7.5 acres of agricultural land backing up to a century-old farmstead and even older oak woodlands, the property is now being leased to a local farmer who will purchase the land in the next few years. The Fund is working on this project in partnership with The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, which will hold the easement and ensure both field and forest will be protected in perpetuity.



Red-winged blackbird nest & eggs (Diana Krug)

✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

33) *Huge*. Adjective. Merriam-Webster defines it as “very large or extensive” including “of great size or area, great in scale or degree, or great in scope or character”. Welp, the Thompson Road Farm is all three, giving it a better claim to the word than any other project in this report.

Let’s start with size. We’re looking at 276.6 acres in *suburban Chicagoland*. That, folks, is not common (and the fact that this is the second time in this report that I’ve written something to that effect speaks volumes to what an extraordinary year it was). And over a third of the site is restorable peatland, which is quite possibly the most efficient terrestrial carbon sink on the planet. That’s not an exaggeration; these wetlands take up 3% of the world’s landmass, while sequestering a good quarter of the globe’s carbon that’s stored in the soil. TLC and its partners will facilitate this rather valuable ecological service by breaking drain tiles on the site to restore its natural hydrology – a process that began naturally over the last few years as old tiles began failing.



Thompson Road Farm – in the heart of Chicagoland. (TLC)

You’ll note that I said TLC *and its partners* will be restoring the preserve, and it’s the scale of that partnership that further sets this project apart from many of its peers. Protecting such an expansive space in McHenry County – taking in not only wetlands, but also forest and agricultural fields – was never going to be a solo endeavor. The Conservancy worked with the village of Bull Valley, the Bull Valley Riding Club and the Equestrian Coalition of McHenry County to craft a comprehensive plan for the property, including over *five* miles of interconnected trails for riding, hiking, walking, and running. Acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, TLC will restore the land and then deed the property to the Village while holding a conservation easement over the preserve to ensure it remains protected forevermore.

34) We turn next to a farmstead and riverine wetland community in eastern...[Boone County](#). That's right, one county is not enough to contain the awesomeness that is TLC, which is now putting into effect the first phase of its plan for statewide domination by accepting a conservation easement in McHenry's western neighbor. This actually makes a lot of sense though because – and this may shock you – natural communities rarely follow arbitrary political lines hashed out in the mid-19th century. Case in point, the Kishwaukee River, the protection of which has long been a focus of the Conservancy's work.



Beaver Creek, a major tributary of the river, itself forms from three small streams, one of which flows through this 119-acre site shortly after arising less than a mile to the north. It's not the headwaters, but it's darned close, and managing what goes into a first order stream is probably the single most important tool for protecting – let alone restoring – the mighty waterways that are the focus of so much of our collective attention. Surrounding the stream and wetland that buffers it, the farm was established in the 1870s and has produced fruits, grains, and dairy. Today, ~90 acres of agricultural fields abut a horse pasture that in turn surrounds a small grove of bur oaks; all part of a mosaic that is forever protected through the partnership between landowner and land trust.

35) The aptly named Pistakee Bay Preserve flanks its namesake feature on its namesake body of water, about half a mile north of Volo Bog State Natural Area. Part of the Chain O'Lakes straddling Lake and McHenry Counties, the shores of the lake grace preserves owned by the state, two county conservation agencies and one ambitious land trust. The previously 3.1-acre refuge saw its area increase by a solid 50% last year with the addition of 1.6 acres of forested high-quality wetland generously donated by the landowner. Small though it may be, the land is home to an animal that looms quite large in the nation's history and consciousness, as the tall trees and proximity to water makes the land a favored eagle nesting site.



Blood Root (*Diana Krug*)

36) We close out the year with a property that epitomizes the conservation ethos. A remnant oak-hickory woodland, mesic and dry-sand hill prairies, a small pine stand and a pollinator bed all intersect on but 4.1-acres northeast of the city of Harvard. Restored and managed by a husband-and-wife team and now protected forever by a conservation easement, their efforts have banished invasive and weedy flora from a good 90% of the land. In their place a visitor will find sandstone ledges handcrafted by the landowner to support native woodland ephemerals and shrubs. All this on a property that, when purchased in 1971, was mostly a field of alfalfa. Today the land is filled to the brim with hundreds of native species of flora, from the common to the rare. What a difference half a century of dedication and care makes, right?



Kim Elsenbroek



Kim Elsenbroek

✿ The Nature Conservancy

37-38) Last year in these pages I rhetorically asked what hadn't already been said about the Nachusa Grasslands, bemoaning the necessity of coming up with something new to write about each time Illinois's largest prairie restoration and home of the state's first wild bison herd in over two centuries expanded its already impressive footprint. I received no respite in 2022, as TNC expanded this first prairie preserve not once but twice. First up was a 19.5-acre parcel with a few buildings and scattered timber surrounded by prairie. You know what else it's surrounded by? Nachusa Grasslands. On three sides. Incorporating the land into the preserve thus simplifies management in a big way, while also adding depth to the site.



Depth is also the name of the game for Nachusa's second addition of the year. Acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, this 77.8-acre

tract does more than build out the site's eastern reaches. It also, after a wait of *16 years*, connects said preserve to a forlorn outpost that was farsightedly added to the Grassland in the early years of the millennium. Patience and diligence are the name of the game here, and Nachusa's leadership team have an abundance of both.

While we're on the subject, a brief sidenote about last year's report, in which I discussed an addition on the northeastern edge of the prairie. Turns out I was a tad misinformed as to the dimensions of the new land. A 5-acre complex of agricultural buildings wasn't included in the transaction, leaving the addition with 112.3 acres; the numbers in the graph at the beginning of this section have been modified accordingly.

39) The Chauncey Marsh State Natural Area in Crawford and Lawrence Counties was established back in the '70s to protect the Illinois Natural Inventory Site by the same name. The DNR holds that the eponymous wetland is the finest extant example of a marsh ecosystem across the entire Wabash Valley, with said ecosystem complemented by sloughs, both upland and bottomland oak-hickory woods, and to top it off restored prairie for good measure.



Although the marsh itself has long been protected, a good half of the larger INAI site was not. Until last year that is when, with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the SNA more than doubled in size when the Conservancy purchased and subsequently transferred to the State 689.5 mostly wooded acres along the Embarras River, interspersed with agricultural fields.

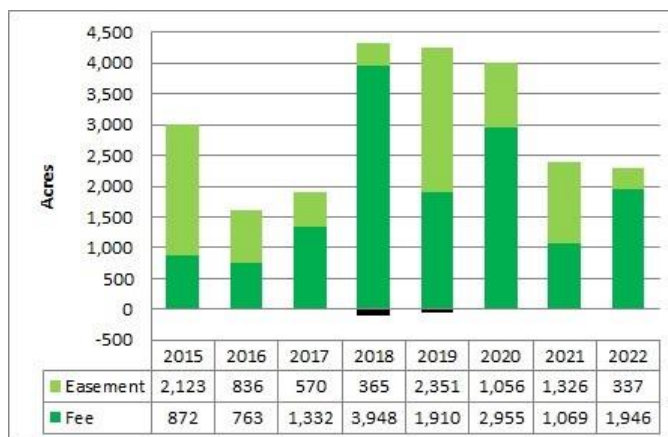
40) Agriculture is by far the most common use to which land is put across Illinois. So it should be no surprise that this is exactly what you'll find at the northwestern tip of Union County along the banks of the Big Muddy River less than half a mile as the crow flies from its mouth as it empties into the Mississippi. Its riverine locale isn't what's interesting about this 188.3-acre tract though. No, what's interesting is that it connects three otherwise lonely units of the Shawnee National Forest (the [meeting place](#), as all reading this will of course be aware, of the Old Gods as they prepared to do battle with the New), and will eventually be incorporated into the site. The project continues an almost two decade partnership between the land trust and federal government that we've discussed in these pages in years past, both protecting and restoring the over 285k acre National Forest that stretches across nine counties from Kentucky to Missouri.





Public Sector Land Conservation

Government at all levels has the seemingly impossible task of meeting the demands of a citizenry as diverse as it is fissionary. Yet from the federal to the local, our representatives both elected and employed have excelled at protecting Illinois' natural bounty and opening it to the public. Last year was no different, with protection of 2,282.8 acres spread from one end of the state to the other. Before we get going, remember; just as with the private sector conservation endeavors, if a project involved the transfer or further encumbering of a property already protected, it's described in full in the coming pages, but was not included in the graph at right, as doing otherwise would double-count the land. Similarly, if a project was the result of a public-private partnership (such as one party purchasing an easement and the other fee title, or a buy and flip) that closed within a year of one another, each party received credit for one half of the property's total acreage. Sometimes that means the numbers from the most recent year will change in the subsequent annual report, so don't give me any grief on that score.



Starved Rock State Park (Illinois DNR – Wikimedia Commons)

✿ Boone County Conservation District

1) Illinois is a big place. Heck, it's bigger than England and half again as large as all of South Korea. Conserving the natural wealth of such a vast land is beyond the capacity of any one person, group...or indeed sector. That's why I love it when I get to lead off this section by discussing the work of the BCCD – because the District is second to none in leveraging the skills and resources of their private sector partners to protect and restore more land than would ever be possible alone. Working in conjunction with *The Conservation Fund*, they protected a 188.6-acre easement east of the City of Belvidere with the support of the *Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation*. Mostly farmland lying less than half a mile north of the Kishwaukee River, the property is also home to a ~19-acre woodland that's *at least* a century old. Not bad for the District's first ever conservation easement.



(David Holman for The Conservation Fund)

✿ Champaign County Forest Preserve District

2) Two years ago in these pages I regaled readers with the story of the Heron View Forest Preserve, which went from “Miscellaneous Property” – an isolated pinprick of land less than a handful of acres in size – to a fully-fledged 98.5-acre wooded oasis along the banks of the Sangamon River north of the village of Mahomet. The site grew again this past year with the generous donation of a 5.1-acre parcel on the southwest corner of the preserve along County Road 2600 N. Aside from providing solid access to the property (the existing access point being a narrow 150' stretch of road frontage) the land also affords residents and visitors alike with a way to explore the entire preserve by virtue of a useful bit of infrastructure – a readily accessible canoe launch!



3) Cross-county trails aren't exactly common, but what's *really* uncommon are *bi-county* trails. And yet that's what visitors will soon find in Champaign and Vermilion Counties, along a 24.5-mile track built by two visionary County Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts.

The Kickapoo Rail Trail – construction of which began in 2016 – will ultimately run from east Urbana in Champaign County, nearly reaching Kickapoo State Park in neighboring Vermilion. The village of Ogden, near the county line, is the site of a small 0.36-acre addition to this corridor thanks to a donation from a local developer. The land provides buffer for the future trail (expected to be completed either this year or next), and a possible site for a rest stop or simply expansion of the surrounding natural area that will lie astride the coming path.



Pincushion moss and Sneezeweed (*Diana Krug*)

✿ DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

4) The village of Kingston has been a spectator to a great deal of the DeKalb County land protection work discussed in these pages over the years, both public and private. This year was no different, though in contrast to every other project in the area that I've had the pleasure of exploring, this 1.1-acre trail corridor lies to the east of the small community rather than the west. The narrow stretch connects to two District preserves lying side-by-side that together take in 185.2 acres adjacent to the nearby City of Genoa. Eventually linking the two communities is a worthy goal in and of itself, but more immediately the corridor covers about half the distance between the Village and the Hoppe Heritage Farmstead, opening the possibility of direct pedestrian access to this [historic site](#).



5) On the subject of trail corridors, this one takes us all the way back to the 2017 report, in which I discussed what would become a mile long path right along the County's southeastern border connecting the Village of Somonauk with the Sannauk Forest Preserve. The County's first property – established in 1939 on the site of an old golf course – almost doubled in size last year to 132.4 acres through the acquisition of 60.2 acres adjacent to the trail.

Acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, most of the addition is in agricultural production, buffered in the south by overgrown forest and a semi-wooded wetland.



Apropos of nothing, here's a fun factoid; the original dividing line between Illinois and Wisconsin was going to run along the southern tip of Lake Michigan, which would have had it pass right through the Sannauk preserve. The border was pushed north by 50 miles in the Congressional resolution that approved the former's statehood on account of the free states wanted it to include land that was conducive to settlement and trade with the rest of the northeast and that thus would attract lots of (northern) settlers to counterbalance what was at the time a population that was centered in the southern reaches of the newest entrant to the Union. Considering that within 50 years this area would produce Chicago, Rockford, Galena, and, through them, the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, I'd say they succeeded.

✿ Forest Preserve District of Cook County

6) The name "Bluff Spring Fen" should clue you in as to where I'm going with this next one. Fens, as longtime readers are well aware, are the rare alkaline cousins of the equally uncommon bog, and so are always *always* worth a looksee. It's partly for that reason that the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and the City of Elgin have long stewarded the Bluff Spring Fen Nature Preserve at the northwestern tip of the County. Part of a larger preserve bearing its name (which is itself adjacent to another District site), almost half of the 167.7-acre preserve is covered by the wetland and has been part of the Illinois Nature Preserves system for well over 30 years.



Ah, but where does the city come in you may ask? Nestled behind a municipally-owned cemetery, wetland and woodlands rolling off of the Forest Preserve site were similarly dedicated, with the entire combined site cared for by a dedicated cadre of volunteers. Recognizing the value of unifying ownership of the natural areas, City and District partnered to transfer to the County the priceless natural lands, with 21.1 acres in four distinct parcels being added to the public site.

7) Spring Lake, in the northwest part of the County, is one of the District's most illustrious preserves, incorporating everything from wetland to forest, savanna to prairie. It offers visitors over 45 miles of trails, paired with one of the first dedicated Nature Preserves in the state. Seriously. It was dedicated at the second meeting of the INPC. You know how many Preserves were dedicated at the first meeting? One. This one was high up on everyone's list, is all I'm saying. To the east of Spring Lake, and on the opposite end of the temporal spectrum, Horizon Farm is the District's newest community resource; a vast grassland and former pasture opened this past year after over a decade of preparation. What links these two together? As of last year, 43.3 acres of woods, grassland, and buildings along Old Sutton Road, that's what. Made possible with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the addition takes the combined site to 3,911.8 acres, which I must say is rather impressive for suburban Chicagoland.



The edge between prairie and woodland – *not* at Spring Lake, **but** in Cook County! (Diana Krug)

8) From the northwest corner of the County we move to the southwest; specifically to the village of Orland Park. This heavily suburbanized landscape is the incongruous home of the Orland Grassland preserve; a 946-acre wet prairie (and marsh) restoration that's one of the largest of its kind in the state. Here's the thing though; much to my surprise, this is a fairly recent development. Like, 21st century recent.



The land, acquired in the 1960s, used to go by the melodious name "Orland Tract". I know; it just rolls off the tongue. Anyhow, for decade upon decade, pretty much the entire property was leased for haying, with trees planted around the perimeter because, you know, that added some variety. This all began to (rapidly) change in 2002, with the decision to restore the land to the wet prairie that blanketed

the site before it was tilled in the 1800s. Restoration began the following year, and over the subsequent two decades, the place* has quite literally been transformed. Either deciding that they didn't already have enough on their proverbial plates or perhaps having a hankering for once more watching a prairie spring forth from bare earth, the preserve grew with the acquisition of 15 mostly agricultural acres opposite a public road that previously marked the Grassland's northern border, and through which runs a small creek that continues into the main body of the site. There's clearly a whole lot still to do across the entirety of the preserve, but the last twenty years have borne witness to a remarkable achievement – one that the next 20 will no doubt build on and take to ever greater heights.

*There's a neighboring 159-acre prairie preserve located immediately to the south across a public road that from my perspective is for all intents and purposes part of the larger site, making this complex even more impressive because, let me remind you, we're in the middle of one of the densest urban agglomerations in the state.



Orland Grassland in all its glory – I wish I could take photos like this. (*Jeanne Stacey*)

9) Concluding our counterclockwise journey around the County, we move now to the Southeast, at the southern edge of the Village of Glenwood and adjacent to both the Villages of Ford Heights and Lynwood. I haven't got a whole lot to say here, in part because of a very good reason – it's a brand new Forest Preserve in an area of the County that can always use more public greenspace. I don't know the District's plans for the 89.5-acre property, but if it's ever opened to the public, it shouldn't take residents long to find, lying as it does along the Calumet Expressway. Acquired with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the bifurcated preserve is split between an upland field in the south and, in the north, a large pond surrounded by wetlands that abuts Deer Creek as it wends its way towards the Chicago River.



✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

10) This narrow property on the southern edge of the 458.5-acre West DuPage Woods Forest Preserve hugging the river from which the site gets its name is a mix of woods, wetlands, and open field. None of which is all that important in the greater scheme of things. What *is* important is its location. Connecting West DuPage Woods with the Blackwell Forest Preserve to the south, these 4.92 acres – donated by the previous landowner – create a corridor between the two sites, offering a path for the proposed West Branch DuPage River Trail. It also connects a previously isolated outpost of the preserve, which is always a nice bonus.



11) Well all, there had to be at least one. Yes, another year, another sub-acre site. This particular property was donated to the District and is found at the northwestern corner of the Churchill Woods Preserve in the City of Glen Ellyn opposite a platted but unbuilt roadway right-of-way. A mix of wetlands and upland – with almost all of the land lying within the floodplain – the 0.6-acre addition to the ~257 acre site is part of a larger wetland complex that is the central feature of this portion of the site. Nothing major, but a worthwhile addition all the same. That's really all I've got for this one folks. There's only so much I can come up with for these smaller properties.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

12) Carpenter Dam on the Fox River – aptly named given that it lies in the middle of the Village of Carpentersville – just about marks the southern extent of the long and slender Fox River Shores Preserve. I thus think it appropriate that a 3.3-acre parcel split by and flanking the dam has been added to the now 435-acre expanse. On the west, you're looking at mostly open water punctuated by a few scattered outcroppings. To the east things get a good deal more substantial. This peninsula extends up to meet the dam, quickly transitioning into a slender tree-filled finger of land that continues all the way to the falls, which it splits in two. And, well, that's that!



13) A bit later in this report I briefly relate the history and awesomeness of Dick Young, the only man in Illinois with multiple forest preserves named after him. That in Kane County is a far-reaching expanse of prairie and wetland – with much of the latter dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve – complemented by elements of forest and agriculture. It’s the prairie though that’s the focus of this 21.8-acre addition to the now 1307.7-acre site; part of a string of Preserves in the southern reaches of the County that form an increasingly connected highway for flora and fauna alike. Bordered by the existing preserve on two sides, the grassland restoration can now extend south to the natural boundary formed by the channelized Lake Run waterway.



14) Last year I closed out our annual review of the County’s wide-ranging successes with a look at the Big Rock Forest Preserve southwest of the Village of the same name. Turns out the process of purchasing a 46.8-acre addition to the site closed well after the folks I have the pleasure of working with expected; rather than closing in late December, the paperwork was finally signed this past summer. So! I’ve rejiggered the annual protection numbers, shifting the project from ’21 to ’22. A little foggy on the details of this one? Recall if you will – and at this point I’m simply quoting verbatim from what I wrote last year – that the preserve contains remnant oak-hickory forests that are centuries old. The ecologically vibrant creek after which the Village and preserve are named runs through both, intersecting with a second waterway of equal health and diversity and giving rise to wetlands that in turn transition to restored prairie. And it’s prairie that a 46.8-acre addition on the south side of the now 1,019.5 acre site will eventually be restored to. At present an agricultural field with two homesteads, the future grassland will also likely be intermixed with small areas of forest cover.



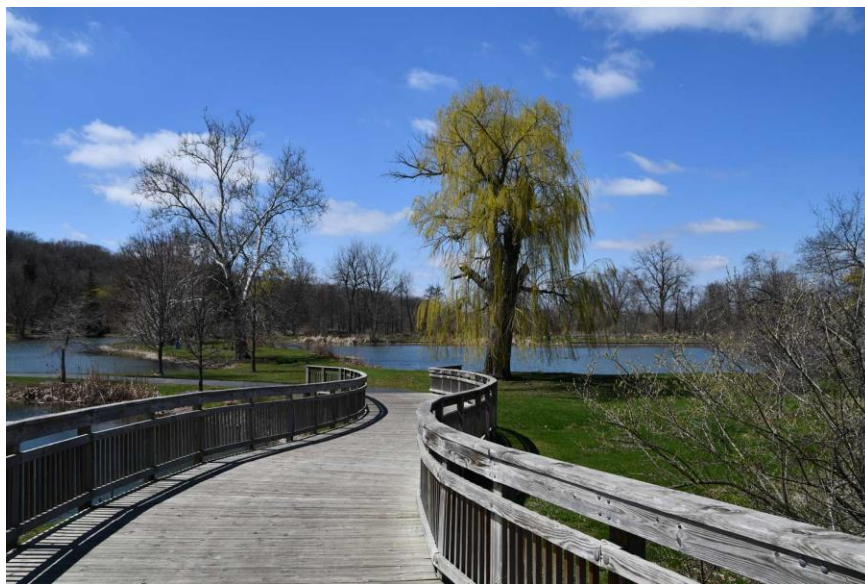
At least I get to reuse this panoramic shot. (*Google Street View*)

15-16) The Hampshire South Forest Preserve (spoiler alert: it's found in the Village of Hampshire) was, until recently, 200 acres of rolling farm fields. Now, following a pair of acquisitions, it's 328.8 acres...of rolling farm fields. Huzzah! OK, so there might not be so much going down right now, but building scale is a necessary prelude for restoration of the land to a combination prairie and sedge meadow community. That's unquestionably helped by a 30.3-acre addition divided into two parcels on the south side of the preserve, and a second expansion, this one of 98.1 acres, on the north. The latter parcel is bifurcated by a channelized stream – part of that future sedge meadow – while much of the upland portions of the properties will eventually be restored to gravel hill prairie.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

17) Hidden Oaks Nature Center is something special. Part of the equally elusive Hidden Lakes Trout Farm in the Village of Bolingbrook, the center has a solid 7,000 square feet of exhibits and event space, alongside an impressive amphitheater and pavilion just outside. You've probably already guessed the star attraction of the larger property; four fishing ponds, nestled next to the east branch of the DuPage River. While both preserve and Center were long owned and operated by the Bolingbrook Park District, last year shook things up, with the site being sold to the Forest Preserve District. Adjacent to the latter's Whalon Forest Preserve across the river to which it's already connected by a boardwalk, the FPD is now in the process of expanding both the center and a trail system that wends through much of the 33.4 acre property.



Hidden Oaks Nature Center (Glenn P. Knoblock - FPD of Will County)

18) We next turn our attention to the small [Kraske Preserve](#)* in the northwest of the County. How small? Well, it more than tripled in size with this 6.3-acre parcel, so that's telling. More relevant though is the addition's place in the greater geographic context, connecting the preserve with the much larger Crest Hill Memorial Park, named after the eponymous city within whose confines both sites are found.



Not the Kraske Preserve
(Creative Commons)

This charitable donation is entirely covered in wetland, both terrestrial and of the open water sort.

It's a natural appendage of the preserve, and its location promises to simplify management of the wetland that covers both properties.

* Admit it. That's gotta be one of the cleverest 404 pages you've ever seen, right?



19) After a year off, we're back with the third addition in four years to the Hadley Valley Forest Preserve. Now this is great for two reasons. First, Hadley Valley is one of my personal top five natural areas in all of Will County. Second and arguably more importantly, it means I can reuse my photo of the site from the 2020 report.

Anyhow, why am I so psyched by the now 836-acre Preserve? Part of an interconnected 2,000+ acre greenway stretching over eight miles along Spring Creek, the District remeandered over a mile and a half of this unifying waterway about 15 years ago, and as anyone who's been reading these reports for a while knows, I love me some stream remeandering. Nature and visitors alike can now enjoy an additional 47.1 acres in the eastern half of the preserve, directly north of the trail that runs through almost the entirety of the site. Acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, the majority of the

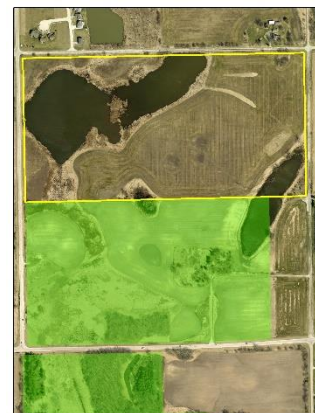


Hadley Valley (Forest Preserve District of Will County)

property is in agricultural production, while the far west is covered by a wooded wetland with a stream running north through the trees. The entire property will be restored to a mix of forest and prairie, with the latter adding to one of the largest prairie restorations in the County.



20) We conclude our time in Will County with the 108.7-acre Black Walnut Creek Preserve bordering the Villages of Crete and University Park. The preserve got a big upgrade with a 72.8-acre addition that, from my perspective, is a natural extension of the existing site. An agricultural field in the middle of the property is flanked by two open water wetlands to the northwest and southeast. The former is the star of this particular show, comprising as it does the northern reaches of a larger complex that extends south into the original preserve. Bringing the entire wetland under the District's management has the potential to *really* facilitate management of the system as a whole, while the adjacent uplands can both buffer and complement the aquatic system.



✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Welcome, my friends, to the longest section in the history of this report. Never in my years of writing these things has one organization completed *so many* projects, and I strongly suspect never shall the feat be surpassed. Both to maintain your sanity through the many pages to come and to set the mood, I recommend streaming some suitably inspiring, appropriate tune while you read. Channel the spirit and emotions of those [training](#) for the big match; preparing [to do battle](#) with a planet destroying intergalactic sand spur; [running](#) like the wind; striving to... ..actually, forget it; there is no more appropriate song [than this](#). Set it to loop, and you're good to go.

21) As many of you know, I write these reports over the course of each year, adding new projects as I learn of them. Because procrastination is apparently part of the national religion, that means many, *many* land deals close around about mid-December. As such, while much of the nation is happily preparing for the holidays, I'm chugging enough Xanax to kill a horse whilst desperately attempting to pull everything together. One such project that came to fruition late in the process of writing last year's report was the long-awaited sale of Milan Bottoms from The Natural Land Institute to the Illinois DNR. ... Or [so I was told](#).



Verily, it was revealed unto me that the land exchanged hands *not* in the closing days of December 2021, but on January 4, 2022, and so my feverish scribbling was wholly unnecessary. But hark! For the lining of silver doeth shineth through. Not only does the delay not impact the graph charting newly protected land year by year (since the land simply passed from one conservation organization to another), but I can simply copy and paste everything I wrote last year, and even reuse a rocking photo of the property kindly provided by the good people at NLI. Sweet. So, without further ado:

A few miles southwest of Moline, along the Illinois River in Rock Island County, you'll find the largest floodplain forest and marsh in the Upper Mississippi. Common in

southern Illinois, this inundated stretch of forest, wetland, and backwater swamp is one big Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site. Its unusual vegetation, as the Natural Land Institute website kindly informed me, offer nesting areas for a panoply of birds, including red-shouldered hawks and bald eagles. Partly for this reason, in 2008 the Institute purchased the 92.2-acre Milan Bottoms preserve adjacent to expansive tracts owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – a preserve which has now been transferred to the DNR and christened an official State Natural Area.



Milan Bottoms (*Natural Land Institute*)

22) We next turn our attention to a project that longtime readers will remember from the 2018 edition of this report. And you know what that means. *More* copying and pasting! This...this must be what “happiness” feels like. What a remarkable sensation.

Recall if you will the 347.436 acre Round Pond preserve in southern Pope County, just west of the Ohio River. Originally acquired by the Illinois Audubon Society, the land is rich with old growth bald cypress and tupelo gum timber growing in a very high-quality swamp adjacent to equally high quality wet floodplain forest and wet-mesic floodplain forest. It’s a place that looks for all the world as though it were transplanted directly from Louisiana; it should surprise no one that high quality examples of all of these ecosystems are quite rare in the state.



The property is also adjacent to The Nature Conservancy’s 206.6 acre Round Pond and a 130-acre Wetlands Reserve Program easement on privately owned land, creating a ~676.6 acre preserve, most of which is part of an Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site (with both the DNR and TNC properties having been dedicated as Illinois Nature Preserves). Adding to the preserve’s value, an open, spring-fed pond in the middle of the site shared by the DNR and TNC is part of a long standing Great Blue Heron Rookery; an area that is also home to multiple Threatened & Endangered species. A fascinating, really unusual site that has been under active restoration and management for the past five years.

23) Last year in this space I *did* briefly discuss an addition to the over 1,000-acre Hanover Bluff State Natural Area in western Jo Daviess County, and definitely did *not* insert the wrong map next to that description. Anyhow, Hanover Bluff stretches from the Mississippi River to Illinois Route 84, taking in land owned not only by the DNR, but the USFWS and three conservation land trusts. It's an actual real public/private partnership, as opposed to the pretend ones



The Apple River at Hanover Bluff (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

that seem to be proclaimed every other Thursday, and

twice during election season. You know where else it now stretches to? Its namesake village, following the acquisition of 94.7 acres of mostly agricultural land along the Apple River on the north side of site.



24) Sticking with Jo Daviess County, in the late 1980s, Iris and Jack Witkowsky laid the foundation of a new public preserve through the donation of 400 acres to establish the State Fish and Wildlife Area that now bears their name. One of the two stipulations of the gift was that the Illinois DNR acquire additional land to expand the site, and have they ever. That work continued last year with the purchase of 24.3 acres of forest and agricultural fields on the northwest side of the now 1,346-acre preserve. What does that mean for the general public? Well, the *other* stipulation was that the state establish a trail system for hikers and horseback riders. That one took a while, but about a decade ago local volunteers joined with the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation and together with the DNR established over ten miles of trails throughout this still growing ecological and recreational refuge.



25) I don't think I'm reaching with the assertion that Pine Rock State Natural Area is not one of DNR's better known properties. At a bit under 10.5 acres, this small site along I-64 east of the City of Oregon in Ogle County is obscure enough that *I* didn't recognize it...and I mapped the place. Twice, as it turns out. And that fact speaks to its value, because the reason I mapped it twice is that the land was dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. An addition to an Illinois Nature Preserve, actually, as it's adjacent to a larger property owned by Northern Illinois University that was dedicated in the mid '60s.



It's this original Preserve that ties together the existing DNR property to its west with a 21.63-acre addition to the east. The addition itself is nothing special right now; an old pasture populated by cool season grasses. The value lays in what it can become, as the land enables the expansion of the existing grassland, which in turn will provide habitat for grassland dependent birds, a fair number of whom require not merely a few acres here or there, but *expansive* open spaces.



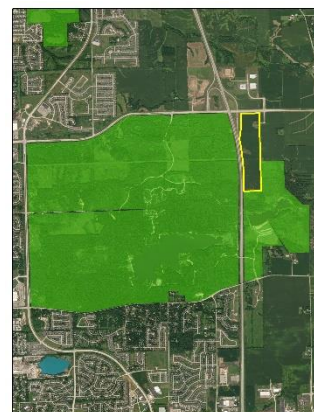
Pine Rock State Natural Area addition (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

26) There are many things you might reasonably expect to see in suburban Rockford. A 3,106-acre state park is, I think I'm safe in saying, not one of them. Yet that's exactly what you'll find in Rock Cut State Park. Established in the late 1950s, over 200 campsites are served by 40 miles of trails winding their way through forests (including a dry-mesic upland forest of such quality that it's been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve) and prairies, wetlands and a 140-acre lake stocked with all manner of sports fish. To this



Rock Cut State Park (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

vegetative and recreational diversity has been added 100.9 acres of farmland on the east side of I-39. The land provides improved access to the east side of the park from the public road to the north, and will be fully integrated to this large and still growing site.



27) Last year I discussed a two-acre parcel acquired by the Illinois Audubon Society to facilitate access to one of the many units of the DNR's Prairie Ridge-Marion State Natural Area. *This* year I have the pleasure of reporting on the transfer of the property from land trust to state. And you know what that means. Yep, for the third time in this section, I get to copy and paste from a previous report! *What* have I done to deserve such a bounty?



As I wrote a year ago, the two Prairie Ridge State Natural Areas in Marion and Jasper Counties are the focal points of a decades-long endeavor by the IDNR and Illinois Audubon Society to rebuild the population of the once common but since decimated Prairie Chicken. The aforementioned parcel – an addition to the now 1,354.2-acre Marion County SNA – continued and reinforced the partnership by providing ready access to the southern reaches of a 240-acre unit of the natural area. This stands in marked contrast to what was previously the best way to get to the isolated site – hopping off a freight train as it flew by. More exciting, perhaps, but not terribly good for the wear and tear of equipment (and interns) hurled from a speeding vehicle.



Prairie Chicken at one of the two Prairie Ridge SNAs (GregTheBusker – Wikimedia Commons)

28) We covered Chauncey Marsh State Natural Area a bit earlier, but it's worth revisiting, and not only because the aforementioned 689.5-acre addition was a joint project between the state and a nonprofit land trust necessitating – by the immutable laws guiding the drafting of Dave's Annual Reports – that I write about it in both the Private and Public Sector sections of this weighty tome (but yes, *mostly* because of that), but also because it's an ecologically dynamic locale. The oak-hickory forest covering much of the expansion both buffers and complements the wetland and wet forest lying below. Also, for a wetland that exists in large part due to the winding Wabash River, it was kinda ironic that the waterway lay almost entirely outside its borders – a deficiency that has now been definitively and impressively addressed.



29) Early 19th century Illinois was a dynamic place, with communities being established and abandoned in rapid succession as the new state developed and grew. New Salem was one of many. Thriving throughout much of the 1830s yet abandoned by around 1840, it's a place that all logic says should be but a historical footnote. And it would be just that, if not for its most famous resident, for Abraham Lincoln called it home for six years, establishing himself in the community after reaching adulthood. It was here that the future moral center of his country learned and honed numerous skills, and it was from here that he was first elected to the Illinois legislature.



Antebellum paddleboat on the property that was only recently removed. (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

Reconstructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps on the original foundations, Lincoln's New Salem is today a living museum open to all. And thanks to a generous resident who lived on the property for decades, granting to the Department a right of first refusal in her last will and testament, a 1.94-acre inholding along the Sangamon River is now part of this 588.7-acre connection to the past and to the President who saved not only a nation but arguably its soul.

30) Oh, *come on!* Another Lincoln-related project? Closing within days of the last one? The heck am I supposed to write here? I'm fresh out of accolades that won't come off as meaningless bromides. This is payback for letting me copy and paste stuff earlier, isn't it?

In all seriousness, Lincoln Trail State Park's connection to the 16th President is a tad more esoteric; it's named after the trail the Lincoln family followed as they traveled from Indiana to their new home. The preserve itself is heavily wooded, with the forest surrounding a manmade lake constructed in the 1950s. A 48.25-acre addition to the now 1,079.1-acre State Park is a natural extension, taking in more of the forest, alongside several agricultural fields.



Bluff atop Lincoln Trail State Park
(Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

31) Quick question. Have you ever heard of the longstanding Copperhead Hollow State Fish & Wildlife Area? Because I hadn't, which I think we can all agree is not something one would expect coming from me. So, several years ago, I noted that Pere Marquette State Park – in Jersey County on the shores of the Mississippi River near the city of Grafton – had surpassed the 10,000-acre milestone. Turns out that wasn't entirely...you know...true. Ever since building the statewide protected lands database, I've been under the understanding that the park consisted of the main preserve along the river and a smaller secondary unit about five miles to the north. Imagine my confusion then when I learned of a 90-acre addition to the aforementioned and mysterious Copperhead Hollow. To my surprise, I learned that while managed as a satellite to its larger neighbor, this now 1,449.9-acre northern site is in fact its own diverse preserve; a landscape filled with open fields and oak-hickory forests on steep hills that blanket a creek flowing through the land.



In addition to its ecological benefits, the addition offers a practical advantage. DNR offers those looking to hunt on the property this fine [parking map](#). Take a look. Now take another gander at the new property. And now flip back to the parking map. See the problem? For those who elect to park at the first opportunity, they literally had a 50-50 chance of intruding on private property upon taking more than a couple dozen steps in any direction. No more – no doubt to the relief of the DNR's legal office.

32) It's 1986. In London, Andrew Lloyd Weber debuts a show about a tortured, murderous artist with relationship issues that's universally proclaimed a touching love story. The Nintendo Entertainment System launches across America, giving parents a whole new neurosis to keep them up at nights. Soviet apparatchiks and poor engineering lay the groundwork for an award winning 2019 miniseries. Oprah goes national. And in McHenry County, a quest begins to preserve and protect a special property with remnant oak/hickory forest, high-quality wetlands, Blanding's Turtle habitat, and the headwaters of my favorite waterway – Nippersink Creek. That quest came to a glorious conclusion last year, with the acquisition of 75.8 acres connecting two units of the



Pond at the Nippersink Headwaters SNA
(Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

McHenry County Conservation District's Alden Sedge Meadow Conservation Area – a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. The purchase of such an important property was a team event, with support from *The Land Conservancy of McHenry County* (TLC) the *Illinois Audubon Society*, and *Openlands*. The latter actually acquired the property at

the close of 2021 in preparation for deeding it to the DNR (I mentioned it in passing last year as something I'd be discussing in this year's report). The land's protection fulfills a decades-long dream and is without question one of the ecological highlights of this entire report.

33) A few years ago in these pages I had the good fortune to review a big addition to Pere Marquette State Park. I closed by observing that the property linked the expansive preserve at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in Jersey County to a pair of preserves owned by the Great Rivers Land Trust, noting that they provided a potential access point to "the eastern reaches of southwestern Illinois' premier State Park". Apparently all involved agreed with that assessment, because both have now been incorporated into the site with support from **The Conservation Fund**. The steeply inclined, heavily wooded 82.6 acres – much of which was already subject to a DNR-held conservation easement granted through the Forest Legacy Program – abut a public road, greatly facilitating management of the vast unbroken forest blanketing the preserve.



Entrance to the Pere Marquette SP addition
(*Kristie DeBrun - IDNR*)

34) Illinois was admitted to the Union on December 3, 1818. Pop quiz. What was the largest settlement in the state? It wasn't the capital of Kaskaskia or one of the soon-to-be bustling ports along the Mississippi. It certainly wasn't Rockford or Chicago, neither of which would be incorporated until nearly two decades years later. No, it was Saukenuk; what today we would refer to as the capital of the Sauk nation. Situated on the banks of the Rock River in the present-day city of Rock Island, the community was home to over 4,000 souls. Led by their Chief, Black Hawk, the tribe was forced to abandon their home following their defeat in the Black Hawk War of 1832. While the Village has long since been consigned to history, the Black Hawk State Historic Site less than half a mile to the east preserves the memory and honors the culture of these early residents; a mission facilitated by a 4.76-acre wooded addition on the southwest corner of the now 179.8-acre historic site.



35) Sand Ridge State Forest is big. At 7,430.1 acres, it's actually the largest of the state forests. As you might expect, the place encompasses its fair share of biomes; from oak-hickory woodlands, to grassland, to open fields, to sand prairies, to extensive pine plantations. That last is a result of a CCC program during the depression, during which the state did local landowners a favor by buying up land that was *at best* of... let us say questionable agricultural value, and then did out of work laborers a favor by paying them to plant several metric tons of pine trees on said land. But it's not Roosevelt-era work programs that are the star here. No, instead I direct your attention to the east side of the Forest, where 66.6 hilly, mostly wooded acres have been added to this expansive state property.



36) There are many things you might reasonably expect to see in suburban Rockford. A 3,106-acre state park is, I think I'm safe in saying, not one of them. Yet that's exactly what you'll find in Rock Cut State Park. Established in the late 1950s, over 200 campsites are servedwait, wait we did this. We just did this. I feel like we *just* did this. The blasted report is too long already, now we're repeating things? Did Dave screw up by accidentally copying and pasting something here? No he did not! For in the waning days of fall the Department acquired *another* 61.86 acres adjacent to that purchased earlier in the year. Well, almost adjacent. The latest addition is separated from its neighbor and the rest of the park by a couple hundred feet owned by the local electrical utility. Same story as its near neighbor though; the property provides both income from leasing the agricultural land and improved access to the eastern side of the park.



More Rock Cut State Park (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

In last year's compendium, I observed that the year had witnessed the largest expansion of the Illinois Nature Preserves system since I first began penning these compendiums. Past is prologue, as 2022 met 2021's already lofty numbers and then brushed right past them, protecting 2,676.6 acres as Illinois Nature Preserves, Nature Preserve Buffers and Land & Water Reserves and taking the system over the 221,000 acre mark.



The vast majority of this expansion came courtesy of a rather large Land & Water Reserve at The Nature Conservancy's Nachusa Grasslands; one of six LWRs established or enlarged last year taking in 2,029.7 acres. They were joined by an additional 522.8 acres dedicated across seven sites as Nature Preserve or Nature Preserve Buffers. Almost all of the sites added to the system last year are owned by nonprofit land trusts or private individuals, with 80.1 acres being protected for the first time. Hey, if you're looking to ensure your land remains open and natural for all time, you quite literally can ask for no better partner.

✿ Kendall County Forest Preserve District

37) Two years ago, I extolled the virtues of a couple of parcels acquired by The Conservation Foundation with support from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation for future incorporation into the Kendall County Forest Preserve District's Reservation Woods, writing:

You ever visited the Dick Young Forest Preserve in Kane County? How about the Richard Young Forest Preserve in Kendall County? Ever wonder how incredible you have to be at your job to have not one but two Forest Preserves named after you? Ecologist [Richard \(Dick\) Young](#) worked for the Forest Preserve District of Kane County for decades and in his spare time co-founded and directed the Kendall County Forest Preserve District. When someone's got two Preserves named after them and they cofounded a Forest Preserve District, it behooves the rest of us to take note when they declare a site to be "Kendall County's finest woods." That's the appellation given by Mr. Young to the small Reservation Woods in northeastern Kendall County, south of the Village of Oswego.



Both parcels – totaling 10.1 acres – have now been deeded to the District, formally expanding a small preserve with a big impact.

✿ Macon County Conservation District

38) In my 2019 report, I wrote of a big addition to the Fort Daniel Conservation Area outside the Village of Mt. Zion in southeastern Macon County. Largely funded by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the District planned to restore over a hundred acres of agricultural fields on the site to tallgrass prairie over the following three years. For those keeping track at home, three years have now passed, and apparently both District and Foundation liked what they saw, as the latter has assisted the former with the acquisition of another 235.5 acres immediately to the west of the original addition, which will be similarly restored to rolling prairie on the now 602.9-acre site.



✿ McHenry County Conservation District

39) Pioneer Fen is, to my mind, an unintentional homage. The core of the property was donated over 20 years ago by a family of conservationists who followed that up over the next 15 years with the donation of *three* conservation easements on the remainder of their land – a popular Christmas tree farm. The owners knew well the value of the site, as one, Mr. Bill Howenstine, was a professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at Northeastern University. There he taught and advised many of the individuals whom *I've* in turn looked up to for my entire career; today's leaders of conservation. In his spare time, he twice served as the Board president of both the District and The Land Conservancy of McHenry County (TLC) – after helping found both organizations. In other words, a true pioneer of Illinois conservation.



Located in the northeastern corner of the County, Pioneer Fen is an ADID (Advanced Identification) wetland containing high quality sedge meadows alongside small calcareous seeps and the eponymous fens along the stream that flows through the property. Here's the thing about that stream; the waterway is itself a headwater supporting a healthy fish community. The fen is home to a multitude of sedges and wildflowers that bloom across the growing season; from Skunk Cabbage to Pussy Willows, from Wood anemone to Solomon seals; from Grass of Parnassus to Grass-leaved goldenrod. The protected area was further expanded by a fourth District held easement and two easements held by The Land Conservancy.



Pioneer Fen addition (*Google Street View*)

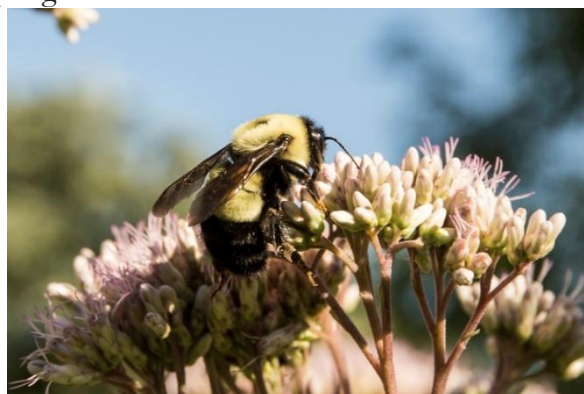
An addition that closed right before the holidays – acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – built on the earlier preservation efforts, resulting in the protection of nearly 90% of the wetlands that eventually form the headwater of Dutch Creek, alongside mature oak groves (did I mention that the original portion of the preserve *also* has mature oak groves scattered throughout the property? Because it does). It also provides access to the site off of a public road to the north. And oh, for good measure, it just so happens to connect the Fen with an adjacent TLC-owned preserve that is part of the same expansive wetland complex. All this was made possible because of *another* donation; this of nine acres of the larger 48.92-acre site – given in honor of the donor’s father who was a passionate lover of nature.

✿ Rock Island County Forest Preserve District

40) Each year, I endeavor to document every single land protection project in the state. I’ll be honest though, to the best of my recollection, not once had I ever checked in to see whether the Rock Island County Forest Preserve District had added to its impressive network of properties. And why would I? The last time the District acquired anything of any significant size, [I Like Ike](#) was maybe the most prominent tune in America. Failing to do so *this* year however would’ve been a pretty monumental screw up, because 2022 saw the establishment of the District’s seventh preserve.



Purchased with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and ***The Conservation Fund*** and located in East Moline, the 181.5-acre Amôwa Forest Preserve is a hop, skip, and jump away from the existing Illiniwek Forest Preserve. Why is that relevant? No, it’s not because I’m trying to eat up line space. It’s because the endangered Rusty Patched Bumblebee – a federally endangered species – has been found at Illiniwek, as has the rapidly declining American bumblebee (for those who are wondering, “Amôwa” is the Sauk word for ‘bee’). If mammals are more your thing, the endangered Indiana Bat and soon-to-formally-be-declared-endangered Northern Long-eared Bat have also been found on the site. Both preserves are covered by extensive oak-hickory forest (the latter also has ~18 acres of a fallow agricultural field that’ll be restored to prairie), suggesting that many if not all of these rare creatures have made or will make their way to the District’s first new preserve in multiple generations.



Rusty patched bumblebee (*Creative Commons*)

✿ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service

41) The Natural Resources Conservation Service focused on a select few sites last year. The first was a joint project with Ducks Unlimited that we discussed earlier in this piece. The second was wholly a public sector affair; located along a rail line about four miles southwest of the City of Pekin and one mile east of the Mackinaw River in rural western Tazewell County, this 38.5-acre easement, bisected by a narrow farm road, is largely surrounded by a narrow ribbon of forest, beyond which agricultural fields stretch in nearly all directions. There's not much more to say, save that I suspect this example of the protection of agricultural lands will be but the first of many to come.



✿ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

42) In the 2019 edition of this report I discussed two small parcels – totaling 0.6 acres when taken together – acquired by HeartLands Conservancy adjacent to the 7,631.9-acre Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge. Both were transferred to the Service last year as planned for incorporation into the Refuge. As I wrote when discussing the original acquisition, the two mostly wooded parcels are located along a rail line on the eastern side of the Refuge, which was created in response to major flooding in 1993 that inundated much of the area. HeartLands itself acquired the properties from the County government, which had taken ownership of both because of non-payment of property taxes.



43) The nascent Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in McHenry County more than tripled in size last November, with the acquisition of two properties I've had the pleasure of discussing in years past. As you might recall, Hackmatack is very much a public/private partnership, with several nonprofit land trusts acquiring land with the intent of eventually turning it over to the Fish and Wildlife Service for inclusion in the Refuge.



The first addition, of 131.66 was originally acquired by Openlands in 2019, with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and the ***Hamill Family Foundation***. I extolled it at the time by noting that *“the site’s most prominent feature is unquestionably a ~19-acre remnant oak savanna at its southern end. A short distance to the north, Tamarack Creek, a tributary of the County’s...premier waterway Nippersink Creek flows through the property in its original meanders. To top things off, records from 1872 ...indicate that there are two natural springs on the property.”* I went on to note that the property was

in agricultural production and would eventually be restored to grassland bird habitat. Well, over the last four years that's exactly what the land trust began doing – work that will now be continued and enhanced by the Service. Oh, incidentally, if you peruse that old annual report, you'll notice a 0.279-acre discrepancy between the two records. That's not an error on my part (perish the thought!); rather, it's representative of a sliver of land that was deeded to neighboring landowners whose fencing just crossed over the border.

44) That first property lies at the eastern edge of the developing Refuge. The second addition of the year – also originally protected by Openlands in 2019 with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – is found on the west. I wrote at the time that the 144.81 acres are *adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's 963-acre Alden Sedge Meadow Conservation Area (which is itself adjacent or in close proximity to another 970+ acres of District property), and will be restored to become an extension of the sedge meadow/wetland community to its south, expanding habitat for almost a dozen state and federal endangered species that visit or call the property home.*" That restoration is already underway, and as with its neighbor to the east will only get better in the years to come...so start planning your visit, is all I'm saying.



While we're on the subject of the Hackmatack NWR and in the interest of accuracy, in the 2020 edition of this annual tome, I wrote of the transfer of a property from Openlands (acquired in 2017) to the FWS, noting that it was adjacent to an existing federally-owned property to the north and a privately held conservation easement to the southeast. I learned this past year that *I was misinformed!* A thin, linear strip of land on the south side of the property was excluded from the purchase, preventing the NWR from formally linking up with said easement.

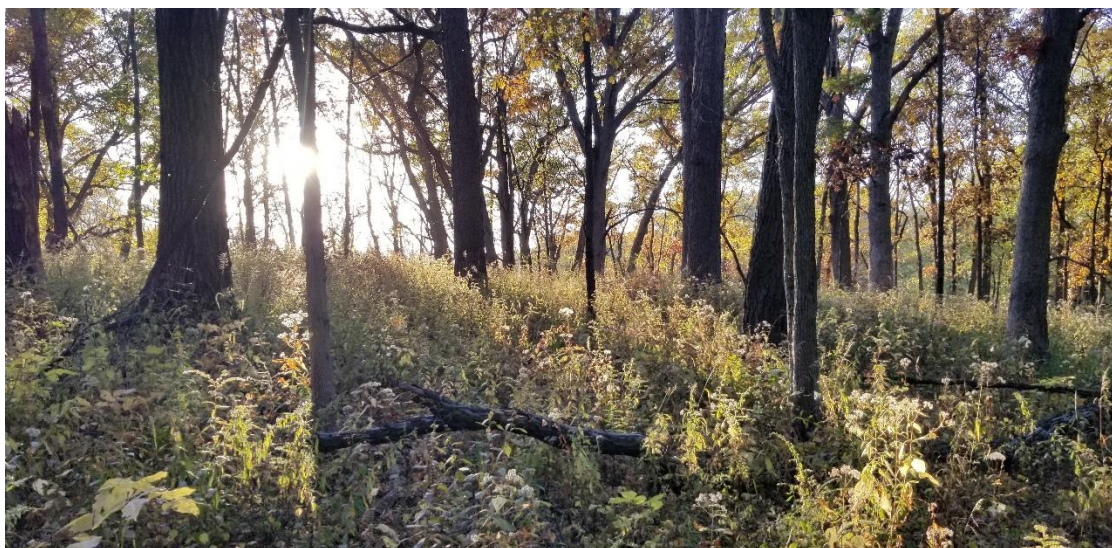


Don't you love it when you have just the right photo of a site readily at hand? (David Holman for Openlands)



Natural Areas Restoration and Management

Multicellular life first evolved at least 600 million years ago. That's a lot of time in which both organisms and the ecosystems they create have only grown more and more complex. Maintaining these finely tuned systems in the face of literally [epochal changes](#) across the globe – let alone understanding them – is a daunting task. An impressive cohort from the laboratory to the field has arisen to meet that challenge. But you don't need me to tell you that; their work, as we'll explore below, most assuredly speaks for itself.



Diana Krug

- ✿ When I was at University, my class was assigned a book designed to broaden our horizons by presenting competing points of view, one of whose central theses can best be summed up as “invasive species; stop worrying so much y'all.” This is one of those books that aged about as well as Union General John Sedgewick's [observation](#) regarding Confederates and elephants. Case in point, researchers writing in the *Journal of Applied Ecology* have quantified the impact of insects from the Old Country on a subject near and dear to the hearts of many; not forests out in the middle of nowhere, but something far more visceral – *street trees*. They estimate that over the next 30 years, ~[1.4 million street trees](#) will die because of insect infestations. The problem isn't limited to a single species; the paper singles out both oaks and maples as at risk, but the vast majority – 90% – of the deaths are expected to be of ash, felled by the emerald borer of the same name. That said, there *is* some good news. Less than a quarter of U.S. communities are expected to bear a solid 95% of the loss, so at least the damage will be concentrated. Bad news? The authors anticipate that New York, Milwaukee... and Chicago will be at the epicenter of the treemageddon, so now is perhaps a good time to consider diversifying the arboreal cityscape.

✿ You know what's really good at dealing with those aforementioned non-native insects? Bats. Birds too, but this story is all about the nocturnal mammalian counterparts of our avian friends. A few years ago researchers at the University of Illinois asked a straightforward question: "Are bats important to forests?" I love this, in part because it's a question I never would've so much as thought to ask. In a [new paper](#) the researchers definitively show that, yeah, yeah they are. In a big way.

It's no secret that bats eat a voluminous number of insects; a [common statistic](#) notes that it's not unusual for a single bat to consume 3,000 insects each and every night. Thing is, if those insects aren't someone's food, then a lot of them are out making their own dinner by chowing down on the forest trees. To quantify the impact of the furry winged predators, the research team [built](#) large mesh-enclosed structures across the state line in an Indiana forest that were small enough to keep out the eight bat species that live in the area, but large enough to allow insects to freely move in and out. Every morning and evening for three summers the sides and tops of the structures were opened and closed in the morning and evening so that birds could also enter and leave at their leisure – this was exclusively designed to study the impact of the bats.



Winged Pest Control (*Creative Commons*)

So, what'd they find? Not only were there three times as many bugs in the mesh-contained woodland as compared to the control plots, but *five times* more defoliation of oak and hickory seedlings. More specifically, hickories experienced a three-fold increase in defoliation, and oaks a massive 900% increase. Oak trees in general and oak-hickory forests in particular get a lot of press – including in these pages – as quality natural communities worthy of protection and restoration. Thanks to the visionary authors of this paper, we now know that it's super important not merely to preserve forest habitat for the sake of their resident bats, but to preserve the bats for the sake of the forest habitat!

✿ Last year I had the pleasure of welcoming the long-awaited Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program. Funded through the Illinois DNR's Natural Areas Acquisition Fund, the program supports 501(c)3 land trusts in their stewardship of lands that are part of the Illinois Nature Preserves system – prairies and forests, wetlands and rivers that represent the best of the state's natural legacy. Now, a lot of sequels don't live up to the original, but that is *not* a problem here. In its second installment, the program made [ten grants](#) to nine organizations totaling \$500k

(like, \$500k exactly. To the penny. As someone who has to be gently convinced that perhaps measuring everything to the hundredth of an acre is a tad excessive, this warmed my exacting little heart). Split 2:1 between purchasing equipment and supplies on the one hand and hiring contractual services to engage in restoration work on the other, the program supported projects across the state, and I have no doubt that I'll be penning similar accolades a year thence.

- ✿ The **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** [tracked](#) 48,522 acres that were burned over the course of the 2021-2022 season (July 1 – June 30). That's not a bad number by half, but here's the thing. It doesn't include a single blade of grass scorched by the good folks at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, who haven't yet completed compiling the records of their recent burns but who put *at least* 20,000 acres to the torch. That makes this the second most productive season on record. As an aside, IPFC tracks burns not only at the federal and state levels, but also those conducted by local government, nonprofit organizations, and even motivated individual landowners. This is information that, to my knowledge, can't be found for any other state in the Union. The Council and its partners have done a superb job assembling this publicly accessible database; one whose size and utility are set only to grow in the years ahead.



Prescribed fires in action (*Creative Commons; John Nelson; Illinois Prescribed Fire Council*)

- ✿ This past summer I was conducting an annual easement monitoring inspection during which the landowner – whose passion is sustainable agriculture – related a recent conversation with the bane of his existence; an...opinionated fellow farmer who'd once tilled his family's land and still leases from a neighbor. Observing that the neighboring field experienced a huge amount of erosion each and every year that flowed directly into the stream on his land and asking if steps might be taken to reduce the soil loss was met with a gruff and simple reply: "Prove it."

At a macro level, that's precisely what a team from University of Massachusetts Amherst has done. By the simple expedient of comparing the elevations of remnant prairies with adjacent and nearby farm fields, they found that the tilled lands were on average 1.2 feet lower than the prairie. I remind you, that's *average*, as the visual

contrast in some places can better be described as a [chasm](#). This adds up to 57.6 billion-with-a-b metric tons of topsoil lost across the Midwest since the 1860s. The erosion rate, at 1.9 millimeters per year, is double what the USDA has identified as sustainable, and given it takes 70 years to generate the amount of topsoil currently being lost *every single year*, this is widely viewed as a Bad Thing. Tangentially, the U.N. has observed that at current rates of depletion, the world may have about [50 years](#) until most of the its topsoil is gone. Now, I take any and all multidecade predictions alongside hefty amounts of sodium chloride. However, given I plan on still being here 50 years from now, even I'm eyeing the whole no-till production and cover crop ideas and thinking that *mayhap* these are worth pursuing with a bit more alacrity across the board.

- ✿ There are quite a few ways to structure a grant program, and I'm not talking about new and innovative forms of paperwork. The unquestioned *best*, from my perspective (and it's my report, so my perspective rules the day) are those that are intertwined with the community and supporters whom the grantee purports to champion. And nowhere is this done with greater effect than the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's [Community Stewardship Challenge](#)** grant program. Most returning readers know the details, but for those just joining us or simply looking for a refresher, the Foundation provides each grantee up to \$21,000 for the stewardship of a project site as a 3:1 match on donations from the organization's supporters. So if the grantee raises \$7k, they'll have \$28,000 to deploy towards the restoration or management of a preserve. On top of that, an additional \$6k is granted if volunteers working on or for the site meet a predetermined number of hours, and for sites owned by nonprofit organizations, another \$5k is made available for equipment that's needed in order to adequately steward the property. That's just shy of \$40k between Foundation and grantee devoted to what are truly community-driven projects. Six such grants to five organizations were awarded over the year just passed, and we can all look forward to seeing the results.
- ✿ Friends of the Kankakee, as returning readers know, is the instigator and steward of one of my favorite projects; the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. Specifically, they acquired and deeded to the USFWS the land that became the Refuge, and have also purchased *hundreds* of individual parcels in a largely unbuilt residential subdivision in northern Iroquois County along the state line with Indiana that will one day be added to the federally-owned site. It's that private land that's the focus here, because Friends' volunteers and supporters have been crazy busy and crazy effective of late in restoring savanna remnants that have in many cases been neglected for decades.



Before and after restoration of an oak savanna (*Friends of the Kankakee*)

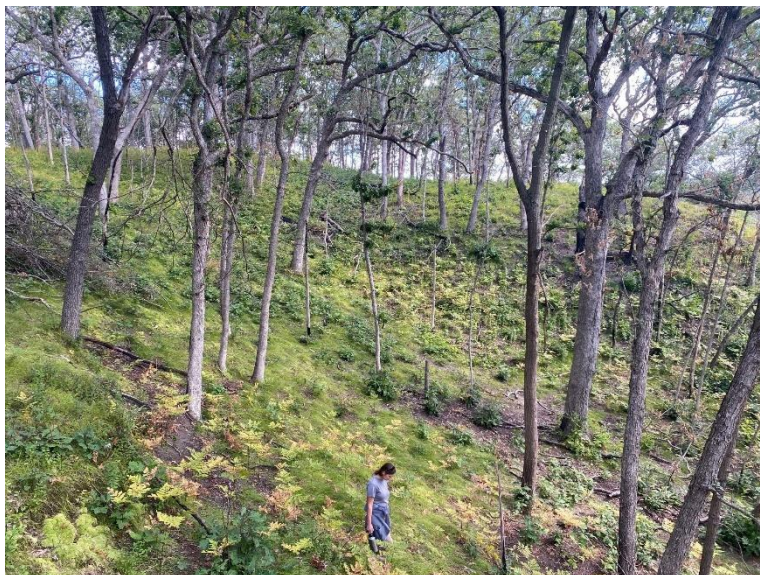
And it's not just woody waste that they've been dealing with. Prescribed burns are quite important to savanna ecosystems – even more so when that savanna ecosystem has been overrun with invasive flora for a century or more. The problem is that the FOK preserve is in a rather remote locale, and remoteness is an invitation for illegal dumping. Specifically, of tires. It's a mecca for lots and lots of car (and truck) tires. The reason that's a problem is that though essential to modern life, tires aren't exactly the most biodegradable or healthy inventions of mankind, such that if your prescribed burn



Tires ready for pickup & disposal (FOK)

sweeps through a pile of the things, they're going to leach toxins into both the soil and air. That didn't sound like a particularly appealing prospect, so Friends' volunteers, local residents, and staff from both The Nature Conservancy and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission combined forces to find and collect *over 1,200 tires* that were subsequently removed by the Environmental Protection Agency, opening the way to returning fire to land from which it had long been banished.

- ✿ The George B. Fell Nature Preserve was established almost fifty years to the day that you're likely reading this; an anniversary affords me an excellent opportunity to talk about a remarkable site dedicated in the name of an equally remarkable man. Located within Castle Rock State Park in Ogle County, the preserve's rugged topography of bluffs and ravines are carved out of St. Peter Sandstone laid down in the Ordovician when life on Earth was young. It's thus appropriate that the preserve is home to over a dozen state threatened and endangered species, in part because it hosts one of the best remaining examples in the state of relict boreal plant assemblages – all cared for by a truly dedicated DNR team. The place is a worthy tribute to Mr. Fell; a man who created the modern incarnation of The Nature Conservancy, founded the Natural Land Institute and, most appropriately, created the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission that now ensures the permanent protection of the land that bears his name.



George B. Fell Nature Preserve (*Melissa Grycan*)

✿ Human ingenuity is a marvelous thing. Down through history, brilliant minds have conceived and made manifest all manner of marvels. The internal combustion engine, powered flight, the super computer in my pocket masquerading as a phone, the actual phone, the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, the internet. However none, I repeat *none* compare with the greatest invention of all time - *branding*. Want to convince people to eat potatoes? Hire armed guards to ostentatiously protect your potato patch while giving secret orders to let the peasants sneak in at night and steal some of those clearly delectable tubers. Have metric tons of fungi growing in your fields and tired of paying to have them hauled away? Slap a made up vaguely Italian-sounding name on them, and cash in as portobello mushrooms become the hot new craze.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources and friends including retailers and high end restaurants across the country have taken this advice to heart, which is why Asian carp, the invasive scourge of rivers and lakes statewide have now become *copi*,



Copi at the Shedd Aquarium (*Creative Commons*)

the star attraction of the dish you absolutely must try. A diminutive of the word that details why the fish are so problematic – copious – the idea is to convince the public to harvest tens of thousands of tons of the continental transplants each year, moving them from waterway to dinner table. And this isn't just a marketing push. The name of the fish – I swear I am not making this up – has been [officially, legally changed](#). Asian Carp are dead. Long live Copi.

✿ There are six species of salamander on the list of Illinois Endangered and Threatened Animals and Plants. The diminutive [four-toed salamander](#) (*Hemidactylium scutatum*) is one of them, and it's easy to understand why. Common along the eastern seaboard, it's manifestly *not* common in Illinois, where it survives as a glacial relict hanging on in cool, wet areas near cliffs or undisturbed, spring-fed waters. As of last January, it was known from 14 populations in the whole of the state, and two of those were of the “yeah, we saw one once a couple decades ago” variety. This is a critter with super specific breeding requirements. They lay their eggs in vegetation perched above slow-moving water, with the tadpoles dropping into the inundated land upon hatching. If the water's moving too fast, or if the place floods, or dries out, the eggs/tadpoles die, and no more salamander.

So. Was that the prelude to a meditation on the semi-aquatic victims of climate change, or something similarly depressing? Quite the opposite, because last spring witnessed the discovery of not one but two new populations of the palm-sized amphibian. This unexpected piece of unquestionably good news came about not through a breeding program or grant-funded expedition, but rather through the proactive efforts of some clever, really knowledgeable, dedicated and, I can say from experience, just plain fun to be around biologists with the Illinois DNR. Knowing where and how to search, they

uncovered both populations in Ogle County in rapid succession last spring. May there be many more still to find.



I'm loving the dalmatian look that this little gal sports on her sides. (*Melissa Grycan*)



Policy & Advocacy

I've been a policy nut since high school – yes, I was a weird kid – so I absolutely love this part of the report. In a democratic society, policy is at its heart the will of the people made manifest; at his first debate with Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln observed that “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.” That fundamental fact is the reason the trends and legislation discussed in this section each year have a greater potential to effect extensive, positive change than do all others.

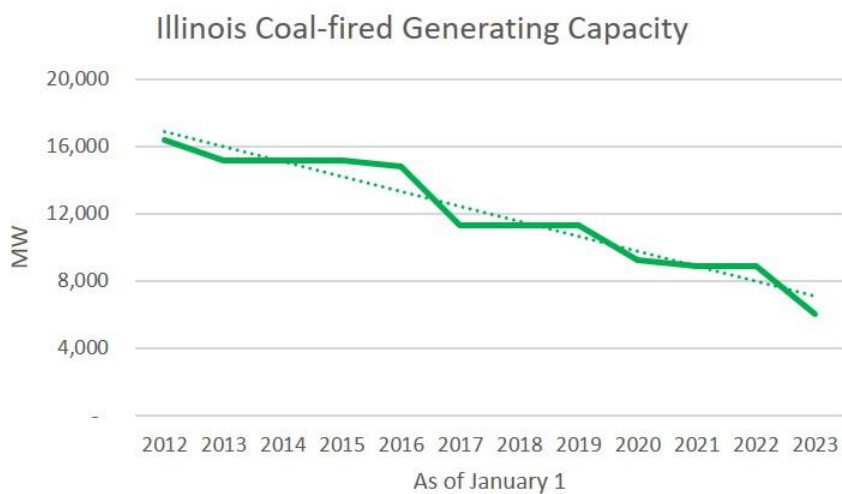


Illinois State Capitol building (*Creative Commons*)

- ✿ Two years back when I first discussed the sooty-colored landscape of coal-fired power generation in the state, I closed by asserting that you were going to be seeing quite a bit on the topic over the course of the 2020s. Let none claim that I fail to live up to my promises, for this past summer bore witness to the closure of *two* generating facilities in suburban Chicagoland, with the [Will County](#) and [Waukegan](#) Stations shutting their doors – the latter after over a century of operation. That's 1,199 MW/yr of 300 million year old CO₂ and a toxic stew of sulfur and nitrogen oxides, lead, mercury, and lung-destroying fine particulates that worm their way through the respiratory tract of any unfortunate enough to cross paths with them – and permit me to remind you that both facilities were in the midst of some of the densest agglomerations in the state. That, I do believe, is more than enough to consider 2022 a smashing success in more ways than one!

...enough, yes, but we're not done – which is good because this section is otherwise kinda thin this year. As summer gave way to fall, the 1,099.8 MW [Joppa plant](#) in Massac County fell silent for the first time since it was commissioned in 1953. *Three* plants in but a single year. Not bad at all. Astute readers will however note that fall is still one season short of the end of the year, and there was no let up in 2022, as winter brought the closure of the 605 MW E.D. Edwards power station in Peoria.

While the three facilities we've already reviewed were shuttered for economic reasons, the Peoria plant's fate was decided as part of a [settlement](#) between the plant's owner and a trifecta of plaintiffs that included substantial support for public health and environmental projects in and around the City and job training/retraining programs for the plant's employees; a good deal all around.



And collectively that, friends, represented over a third of Illinois' remaining coal plants, and an equally solid 32% of all of the coal-fired generating capacity across the state. In one year. And there is much more to come, as the 2020s are just getting started.

- ✿ It's not gotten a whole lot of press, but November saw the culmination of a campaign (literally and figuratively) that might well have a greater impact on both conservation and restoration work in the Chicagoland area over the next decade or so than any other. By what in this day and age is a huge margin of 63%-37%, voters in Cook County [approved](#) a 0.025% property tax increase to fund the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. That'll channel an additional ~\$41.7M/yr to the District, which also comes out to be ~49% increase over its current budget.

How will those funds be used? The [promotional material](#) has a nice pie chart with gently soothing colors that I've little doubt a consultant was handsomely paid to craft, but the majority can be broken down into five buckets (no, not three. I've come to hate that overused number even more in the time since I ranted about it at length last year). About a quarter will go towards public amenities, safety, landscaping, programs, and admin – hereinafter collectively known as “stuff about which I have nothing to say.”

Just over \$10M will be directed to facilities maintenance and ecological restoration, with over half going towards the latter. Of that, I have plenty to say! I haven't much written about it, but the FPCC has been on a tear over the last few years. Next year alone, they're on track to take on pretty significant restorations at preserves in the Tinley and Thorn Creek watersheds as well as Red Gate Woods in the Palos system of preserves. This is a team that very much knows what they're doing, such that I'm really looking forward to seeing how they both expand and enhance restoration efforts in

what is by far the state's largest Forest Preserve (or Conservation) District. As an aside, the FPCC puts out an awesome internal quarterly newsletter that discusses these projects and more that they generously let me share. Take [a look](#); the quality of this thing puts my poor efforts to shame.

Next up, most, myself included, think of the District as manager of the County's natural heritage. What many of my readers – and I suspect the vast majority of the general public – don't know is that the FPCC's mission extends beyond the confines of Cook County. The District is also home to both the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Brookfield Zoo which play a significant role in the conservation of rare and endangered flora throughout the Midwest (in the case of the former) and wildlife around the world (in the case of the latter). A combined 15% of the new funds will be devoted to maintenance and capital improvement projects at the two institutions.

The fourth bucket, taking in a bit over a fifth of the new resources, will be devoted to bringing the District's pension fund into the black since – like just about every other public institution in the country – the plan has been underfunded for a good long time. Ordinarily, this is where I'd make some joke about taxpayers being on the hook for guaranteed pensions and wouldn't it be nice if workers in the private sector could rely on taxpayers to bail them out, but (and I did not know this) FPD employees aren't part of the Social Security system (which, yes, to be fair is also going bankrupt and I don't personally expect to ever be able to draw upon it, but that's another discussion). Given this, I think it only decent that those same employees can rely in retirement on this promised financial support.

Finally we turn, IMO, to the most engaging element of the plan; ~\$7.3M will be directed towards land acquisition, with a focus on the heretofore underserved southeastern portion of the County. The Powers That Be project they'll be able to purchase at least 2,700 acres over the next two decades, which is great, because not only will this provide an opportunity to increase the amount of public land in areas that could really use more of it, but it'll also enable staff to link up discrete preserves into larger, contiguous macrosites – the immense, multifaceted value of which anyone who's read this far is well aware. The most exciting aspect of the initiative from my perspective is that everything I've just described only covers the next twenty years or so. Unlike the case with all of its peer Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts, Cook County's land acquisition (and major restoration) budgets aren't funded by one-time infusions from bond referenda. Rather, the referendum has ensured a steady – inflation-adjusted – annual appropriation of funds that, with sound management, will enable the District to *indefinitely* continue to expand the Forest Preserve system, restore those lands, open them to the public, and engage both regionally and internationally.



Ned Brown Forest Preserve (*Creative Commons*)

✿ On a cold winter day in the waning weeks of December, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. The draft of this 25,000+ word monstrosity was *finally* complete. I closed up shop a bit after 1:00 in the afternoon with a sense not of elation nor even relief, but simply blessed finality...Little did I know that the good people at the Land Trust Alliance – who’ve clearly been playing the long game by insinuating themselves into my trust – were at that moment working with the U.S. Congress in a coordinated effort to crush my spirit. For at precisely 3:02 pm, my inbox dinged with the receipt of an announcement. As I read the email, my heart sank. Could I justify ignoring this? It’s national in nature after all. No need to write of it in a parochial document focused exclusively on one simple state nestled in the Midwest. Nay, I could not, for as much as I might wish it to be otherwise, this was without question the most important news in American conservation of the year...quite possibly in several years.

What was of such consequence that it forced me to reopen my word processor? Congress had passed an omnibus spending bill, one element of which was the [Charitable Conservation Easement Program Integrity Act](#). So, time for a quick background. Mine is a rather specialized readership, so I trust you’re all familiar with conservation easements. What you may *not* be familiar with are *syndicated* conservation easements. In a normal conservation easement, a landowner might have a \$1M property that they encumber with an easement, reducing its value to, say, \$650K, resulting in a \$350K difference in value that can be deducted from their taxes as a charitable gift. Syndicated conservation easements are just like that, except insofar as they’re nothing like that.

In a syndicated easement, a company, typically an LLC, will buy a property, say, for \$5M. They then ~~bribe~~ hire an ~~ethically-challenged~~ appraiser who discovers something wonderful. That \$5M property is in fact worth \$25M. Glory be! (I’m not even exaggerating here). With this amazing new valuation in hand, they then market an investment opportunity in which people who buy into the company get more than they invested back in federal tax refunds (often at a ratio of 2:1 or higher). In 2018, there were 296 deals of this sort [resulting in over \\$9B](#) in tax reductions – as compared to over 2,000 *non*-syndicated easements that collectively resulted ~\$1B in deductions. In addition to being morally reprehensible and raising taxes for the rest of us, this sort of scheme put the easement tax deduction at risk. Because come on, under these circumstances even *I* would vote to rid the tax code of this whole charitable deduction to a “qualified conservation organization” thing.

The Land Trust Alliance, Ducks Unlimited, and many more worked for years to get this scam shut down. The above referenced bill – which, again, was subsequently wrapped up into the federal government’s fiscal 2023 Mega Bill because that’s how stuff gets done in D.C. – dictates that if the value of the easement is more than 2.5x the value of a partner’s original investment, the donation “shall not be treated as a qualified conservation contribution” for purposes of charitable deductions (with a few quite reasonable exceptions). Thus likely ends the scourge of syndicated conservation easements. And *that*, I think we can all agree, was most assuredly worth picking up my digital pen for once more.



Protecting Protected Land to Ensure It's Protected

For the longest time, I couldn't think of a topic for this year. There was always the potential of building on last year's list of writing quirks that should be treated as federal crimes worthy of capital punishment by branching out into other things that annoy the heck out of me, but going back to that well again so soon seemed kinda lazy.* I was honestly planning to ditch the section this year. Then, in early November politics bestowed a timely subject – and no, oddly it had nothing whatsoever to do with the elections that were at the time pending just a few days hence.

As most reading this know, Geographic Information Systems – digital mapping stuff – is My Thing; it's what pays a lot of the bills. In that capacity, and more often than you'd probably expect, I get asked how much land is protected in one area or another. To which my answer is invariably an exasperated “hold on, I need to go merge a bunch of records together so that we're not double-counting.” Because there is a *lot* of overlapping protection in the state. My personal favorite is this site in suburban Lake County:



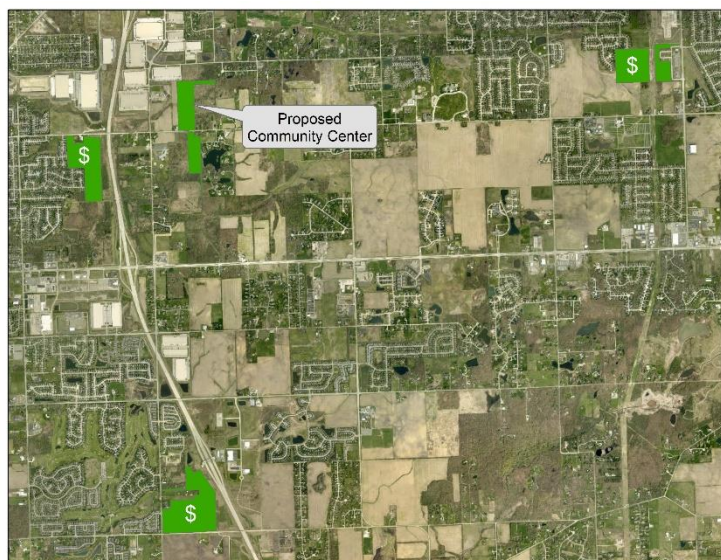
Fun fact – I did volunteer work here in high school

Owned by a government conservation agency, the land is also encumbered by a conservation easement held by a regional land trust, enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system and, for good measure, the trail has a *second* conservation easement on it, this one held by the local County Forest Preserve District. This sort of thing sometimes confuses folks. Why would one property be protected by multiple parties? Because people are *<redacted>* ... erm, because people have a wide diversity of opinions on the needs of their communities and the best way to utilize public goods and resources. Put simply, one person's nature preserve is another's land bank.

Case in point, the Homer Township Open Space District in rural Will County. Simplifying only slightly, for all intents and purposes the Homer Township OSD owns four sites that range about 50-80 acres in size. Township Open Space Districts are little known – there's only four in

the state – but are essentially Township-sized Conservation/Forest Preserve Districts that are governed by the same officials overseeing the Township itself.

In Homer, the new political leadership has hit upon a brilliant plan. Sell off two of the four properties to developers, and use the money to pave over a third by building a ginormous “community” center with 1,000-1,500 parking spaces for...someone or other. Build it and they will come. Oh, and there’s also on and off discussion about selling the fourth site to be turned into empty-nester high density housing. To summarize then:



Call me close-minded, but this plan seems a tad contrary to what the voters, you know, *voted for*. Don’t get me wrong; I’m actually all in favor of provisions that enable property that meets specific criteria to be sold if conservation of the site no longer makes sense because of changing circumstances or something, but this sort of thing is – to put it mildly because this is a family-friendly report – completely unjustifiable.

And *that* is why multiple layers of protection are not only a thing, but a thing that is super valuable. Both intentions and the people in charge change. And in this business, where the holding term is “forever”, probabilistically speaking you’re eventually going to get someone who wants to turn your forest into a parking lot. I mean, it’s literally a mathematical certainty.

This is the whole “put an infinite number of monkeys in front of an infinite number of keyboards and one will eventually type the complete works of Shakespeare” thing, or more prosaically how the extent of the FEMA 500-year floodplain is determined. The basic formula isn’t even that complicated; $1-(1-p)^n$ where p is the probability of the event occurring (e.g. an elected official deciding to sell off a protected property) and n is the number of times the event has had an opportunity to occur (e.g. the number of people to occupy the elected position in question). Try it yourself; math is fun kids!

To counter this nihilistic determinism, wiser heads than I created a host of property rights that can layer on top of the actual ownership of a piece of land. This was a major objective of the founders of the **Illinois Nature Preserves Commission**; it’s also why Illinois Beach State Park was the first Nature Preserve ever dedicated (Pearson, Arthur. *Force of Nature*. Page 116. That’s right people. No unsupported declaratory pronouncements here. I can and will back up

my wild assertions. Do *not* mess with this nerd.), and is why a number of County Forest Preserves today are such enthusiastic partners of the Commission. INPC dedication and registration do more than protect the state's highest quality natural resources in a general sense – they protect them from future political interference (and also from condemnation. Huge bonus, that) by elected or appointed officials overseeing the state and local jurisdictions on which the vast majority of Nature Preserves lie.

Conservation easements can have the same effect. We most often associate easements with protecting privately-held land – it's a major element of this report every single year – but they can be and are just as effectively used to provide an extra layer of protection over land that's already protected by a public agency or private land trust. The state was really into this in the early years of the century; a bygone era when Illinois wasn't bulk purchasing red ink for its budget projection printouts such that the legislature passed bills to provide support to local governments seeking to purchase land for preservation or recreation. One of the provisions of those grants was that any land purchased with the support of state funds had to subsequently be encumbered by a conservation easement granted to the IDNR – to ensure that property purchased with state funds for conservation *stayed* conserved (granted, I think the DNR then nearly forgot all about the easements, but they're all mapped and fully documented now, so life is good). This was the impetus for the original easement placed on that property I described above; the private landowner, who was donating the future preserve, wanted to ensure that the land couldn't be sold off by some future administration. It's not unheard of, but you don't see this sort of thing very often with land trust-held properties; that's something I'd quite like to see changed.

Finally, **deed restrictions** are the oldest yet lesser-known resource with which to protect protected lands. These come in all flavors, and are often part of the original acquisition of a parcel. Most prominently, properties acquired with support from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund have specific restrictions that, to pick a totally speculative and definitely not real example, would prevent land in a State Park from being appropriated by a hypothetical waterway agency wanting to excavate massive pits to fill with dredge material that'd later be sold for profit. Moving a bit forward temporally, wetland mitigation banks are a popular example of land encumbered by deed restrictions well after acquisition. Since the banks both sell credits and are federally regulated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Corps requires such a restriction so that the newly constructed compensatory wetland *stays* a wetland.

There you have it; three major tools that – individually or collectively – can be used to increase the chance that your protected land actually stays protected.

* But seriously. There is nothing worse, *nothing worse* than calling a company or some other organization and being greeted with the most asinine recorded introduction in the English language: “*Please listen carefully as our menu options have changed.*” No, no they have not. They changed once seven years ago leading you to record that rage-inducing opening. And because your menu options have *not* changed in the three and a half congressional terms since then, there was never any incentive for someone to go back and rerecord the whole bloody spiel just to omit the now obsolete opening. It's the preface of at least half the places I call in any given week. Future audio archeologists trawling our digital records are going to assume the phrase must have been a religious exhortation to the Gods beseeching their favor from these primitive 21st century ancestors of theirs. At this point I'd make a crack about how perpetrators of this practice should be thrown into a gulag, but I must refrain as that particular turn of phrase has, shall we say, reacquired something of its original nefariousness over the past year. ... OK, there you go! Just one rant this time, but I hope you enjoyed it.



2021 Revisited

Once again, I hit the ‘send’ button on this report last year thinking – hoping – that I’d found and discussed each and every land protection project in the state. And once again, I was subsequently disabused of that foolish belief. It’s all good though, because there are few things more heartening than learning of new sites that have been protected across this good state.

✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

Two years ago in this space I was presented with the challenge of detailing the majestic wonder of a 2,600 sq. ft. pinprick of land fronting a railroad on the edge of the Freeman-Kame Meagher Forest Preserve. Well, that was impossible so – cleverly, if I may be so bold as to say – I instead got very meta and wrote about how I write about each project, noting that there vexingly wasn’t much to say about that particular acquisition. I was pretty darned pleased with myself, which should’ve been a warning. Because, yep, the District clearly took note of my maneuver, thought “oh *h*ll* no” and set about acquiring the rest of this narrow strip of land. This one didn’t make it into last year’s report because the recording process was a little screwy, such that I only found it whilst composing this year’s tome.



✿ Forest Preserves of Winnebago County

March 11, 2022. Until that fateful day, I was in a good place. For the first time ever, I’d managed to find and discuss every single bloody land protection project in Illinois over an entire year. Didn’t miss even one. This entire section was going to be excised. *But then.* But then, I had the pleasure of chatting with some super nice and equally knowledgeable folks with the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County and in passing, a bombshell, a gut punch, a strike to my very heart was delivered. In the closing months of 2021, the District, I learned, had purchased 30 acres at the intersection of the Pecatonica and Sugar Rivers, adjacent to the 526.5-acre Sophia & Calvin Ferguson Forest Preserve and the 4.7 acre appropriately named Two Rivers Forest Preserve. The mostly forested land is complemented by a small agricultural field in its southwest corner, and is an excellent and now eternally protected example of the County’s natural heritage.



✿ The Nature Conservancy

So, earlier in this piece I extolled the Nachusa Grasslands – Illinois’ finest and most expansive prairie restoration. As most reading this know, The Nature Conservancy is also custodian, alongside Northeastern Illinois University, of the Prairie State’s largest native prairie remnant. Five prairies, actually, incongruously found in the highly urbanized inner Chicago suburbs of Markham and Harvey (you can see two of them as you drive along Interstate-294 if you know what you’re looking for). Not only are these grasslands large by remnant prairie standards but, as you’ve probably guessed, they are *quality*; one of the best in the Midwest in fact if the Conservancy is to be believed, and I for one see no reason not to.



Markham Prairie East is an excellent representative of this handful of sites, as it’s seen by well over 100,000 people every single day. Most of them just don’t know it, as they quickly pass this mix of prairie and woods bordered by Interstate-294. It’s the woodland part of the site that is the *raison d’être* of this particular narrative, as a 0.4-acre addition to the now 43.6-acre site straightens the southern border and in so doing notably simplifies management of the woodland. Although the Powers That Be didn’t record the deed for this one until 2022, it was signed and dated by all parties involved in the first half of 2021, so I’m categorizing this as a project from that earlier period. Oh, also, while we’re on the subject, they also picked up an adjacent 8.7 acres in 2019 that I only learned of this past year.

✿ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service

For all that I’ve made kvetching about the slow pace at which the Natural Resources Conservation Service releases news from their easement programs something of an annual tradition, there was but a single project that still lay unpublished when I put the finishing touches to this report last year. Considering it only closed in mid-December, I think that perfectly understandable. A Wetlands Reserve Easement under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the project in question is found in the southwest corner of Crawford County, but a quarter mile from the winding Embarras River. Taking in 213.8 acres, it joins an existing NRCS easement a short distance to the south in both providing a basin for floodwater that would otherwise inundate surrounding agricultural fields and keeping the nearby river clean as it flows south to meet up with the Wabash on the way to Gulf.





Changes at the Top

The inestimable **Jo Fessett** has taken the reins at the **Illinois Audubon Society**. This was, I can say without any hesitation, a *fantastic* decision by all involved that brought a big smile to my face upon learning the news. Ms. Fessett has long been part of the organization's senior management team, helping guide the Society to ever greater heights. She takes over from **Dr. James (Jim) Herkert**, who after what was by *any* definition a successful five-year tenure capped by the unprecedentedly generous bequest extolled in last year's report (one he and his predecessor Tom Clay brought to fruition during their respective tenures) has embarked on a well-deserved retirement. As I wrote in this space when he took the reins at IAS, Jim's "list of notable accomplishments is longer than my entire resume," with a career spanning both the public and private sectors. Basically, anyone with even a passing interest in Illinois conservation owes him a rather deep debt of gratitude.

The **Forest Preserve District of Kane County** is in exceptional hands as **Ben Haberthur** has taken on the role of Executive Director at – as these reports of the last few years have demonstrated to almost absurd effect – one of the *fastest* growing Districts in the state. Mr. Haberthur has extensive experience with the FPDKC that's matched only by his knowledge and expertise. Most recently serving as the District's Director of Natural Resource Management, he previously honed his skills at the neighboring McHenry County Conservation District. He's also – and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough – an all-around fantastic guy!

What can I say about **Marianne Hahn**, who stepped down last year as Executive Director of **Friends of the Kankakee**, that hasn't already been said? For over 20 years, Dr. Hahn has been the singular driving force behind the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, negotiating the purchase not only of 275.8 acres – mostly in quarter acre or smaller lots – that will one day be integrated into the federal site, but of the Refuge itself. Her work and sheer tenacity have long been a personal inspiration and example, and always will be. **Jim Sweeney** has ably taken on the task of continuing and building on this legacy, and I'm really looking forward to watching Friends and the Refuge truly thrive.

Lake Forest Open Lands Association is perhaps the premier community-based land trust in the state. The breadth (and popularity) of their programs and events is matched only by the quality of their preserves and dedication in protecting and restoring the community's natural heritage. **Ryan London** has been a huge part of that work for two decades, expertly managing and growing the organization's portfolio of properties year in and year out. To the great benefit not only of Lake Forest but the entire conservation community he agreed last year to assume the position of Executive Director, succeeding the equally incredible **John Sentell**. John led LFOLA through much of my professional career, expanding the Association's programming and preserves while – proving he would make a terrible elected official – closing out a decade-plus of solid financial management with the successful implementation of a major capital campaign that both provides for the long-term management of LFOLA's exceptional preserves and puts the organization in prime position to expand its work in a multitude of fields.

This last one is a bit outside the norm, as it represents an organizational change that was announced at the tail end of 2022 and became official at the dawn of the new year. Cynthia Kanner has joined **Prairie State Conservation Coalition** as its inaugural Executive Director. Ms. Kanner comes to her new position with long experience in the state, serving with the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County for 15 years, and leading the organization over the last four.

We're done! Oh, thank all that is good in this world, we're *finally* done. Thanks for joining me on this look back, and see you next year!

David Holman



Prairie State Conservation Coalition Guiding Principles

We believe in:

Service to the Entire State

PSCC recognizes its role to connect, serve, and to advance the capacity and impact of *all* land trusts throughout Illinois, and through them, protect our land and water resources.

Collaborative Leadership

We are grateful for and respect the work of member land trusts who are the backbones of leadership for PSCC. We also appreciate many other organizations, foundations, agencies, municipalities and individuals in Illinois that dedicate themselves to furthering conservation. We work collaboratively and transparently by leading, serving, convening and coordinating to best leverage the work of all for maximum impact.

Building Trust and Awareness

We acknowledge that many within Illinois may not understand the value of its natural assets or the long-term effectiveness of community-based land trusts to protect the health of our land and water. Therefore, it is our responsibility to support and promote our membership by providing some of the educational tools and operational assistance necessary to build awareness, relevance and trust, and ensure that their work is honored in perpetuity.

Reflecting the Communities We Serve

We acknowledge that Illinois is geographically and demographically diverse and that individual land trusts must be sensitive and responsive to that diversity. We are made more whole by fully reflecting and engaging the depth and breadth of the populations we serve.

Nature Nurtures

Our individual physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being is dependent upon access to and engagement with beautiful, natural spaces. We believe that nature is good for the soul, and that everyone is entitled to experience the outdoors.

Healthy Natural Ecosystems That Sustain Communities and Strengthen Economies

The allure of Illinois and the quality of life enjoyed by its residents is inextricably linked to the health of the natural environment. Natural ecosystems benefit our well-being, and our State's future economic health is dependent on the sustainable use of its abundance of natural resources.