



2021 Year in Review

**Annual Report
of Land Conservation Achievements
in Illinois**

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.

2021 Board of Directors

President

Brook McDonald
The Conservation Foundation

Vice President

Christie Trifone Millhouse
Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

Secretary

Dave King
Prairie Land Conservancy

Treasurer

Dave Easter
Grand Prairie Friends

Paul Botts
Wetlands Initiative

Joann Fricke
Clifftop NFP

Kerry Leigh
Natural Land Institute

Susan Lenz
Consultant

Fran Harty
(retired)

Tharran Hobson
The Nature Conservancy

Ryan London
Lake Forest Open Lands Association

Bob Megquier
Openlands

Author bio:

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



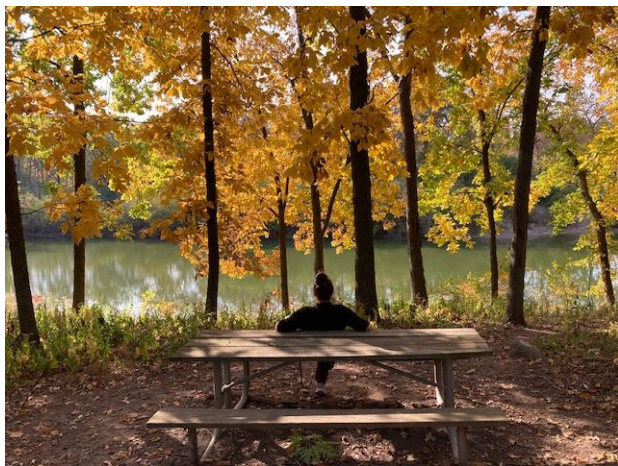
2021 – Year in Review

And we are back! Here's hoping everyone is doing well this fine day. With the dawn of the new year it gives me great pleasure and even greater relief to present this humble compendium of *last* year's conservation projects great and small across the length and breadth of the good and very flat state of Illinois. With over 3,700 acres protected, tens of thousands of acres managed or restored, and legislation impacting the entire state, 2021 was, in short, an eventful year.

Because they're somehow not yet tired of me, this report is once more supported by 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. 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 2021 in Review. Curious as to what's in store over the next 50-odd pages of my increasingly desperate attempts to keep things engaging? Well, wonder no more:

- ✿ [Private Sector Land Conservation](#)
- ✿ [Public Sector Land Conservation](#)
- ✿ [Natural Areas Restoration and Management](#)
- ✿ [Policy & Advocacy](#)
- ✿ [Dave Shakes His Fist in the Air](#)
- ✿ [2020 Revisited](#)
- ✿ [Changes at the Top](#)



Dayton Bluffs (*The Conservation Foundation*)

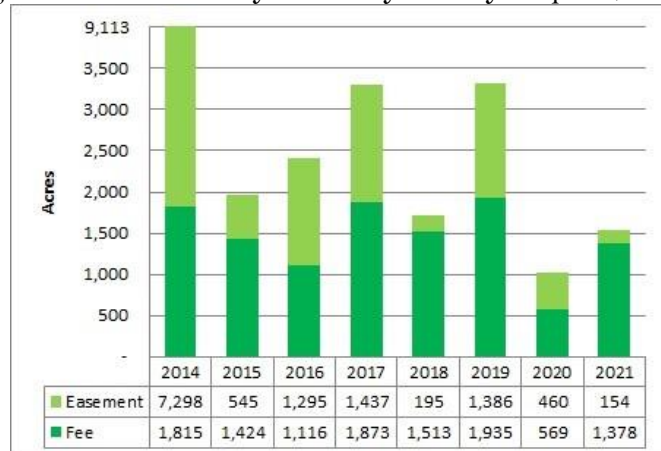


Raccoon Creek (*Natural Land Institute*)



Private Sector Land Conservation

Following up on a year marked by what might generously be called *unusual* challenges, I expected the number of land protection projects to decline fairly markedly. To my surprise, that was in no way the case, with a small dip in numbers more than made up for by scale, with 1,633.5 acres of forests and wetlands, prairies and rivers permanently protected from one end of the state to the other. Because that graph you've been eyeing gets a fair bit of attention each year, let's get the annual explanation of where those numbers come from taken care of so we can jump into the meat of things. As always, if a project resulted in the transfer of an existing protected property or easement from one conservation organization to another, or granted an easement over land that was already otherwise protected, it's not included in the annual acreage total so as to avoid double-counting...But it *is* certainly included in this volume!



Because one bit of convoluted number massaging isn't enough, last year I changed things up. Since protecting land is often a team sport, it's not uncommon for a land trust to purchase and temporarily hold property for a division of government until budget considerations have been addressed, or to accept a conservation easement over a parcel – lowering the market value of the land and thus enabling their government partner to purchase the property. To better represent this, if there's a public-private partnership wherein a property changes hands twice within a year, or one party acquires an easement over the land and the other one acquires the property, each party gets credit for half of the project's total acreage. And with that out of the way, let's get started!



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

✿ Franklin Creek Conservation Association

1) If you've ever visited the Illinois DNR's Franklin Creek State Natural Area (SNA), there's a solid chance that you unknowingly traversed property protected and once owned by the eponymous Association. Starting life in the '80s by successfully advocating for the creation of what became the SNA, in the late 2000s they branched out into land protection, acquiring and eventually deeding to the state additions to the still growing site. Their very first purchase – still owned by the Association – was the 86.3-acre Franklin Creek Headwaters preserve (not *actually* the headwaters of the waterway, but close enough), a short distance southwest of the DNR site, adjacent to the Village of... wait for it... Franklin Grove. With the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** a 3.4-acre wetland on the eastern bank of one of a tributary of the titular stream was added last year to this mix of forest, wetland, and farm fields.



✿ Friends of the Kankakee

2) Is there something you look forward to all year; an event that fills you with anticipation like a kid on Christmas morning? For some, it's a holiday, for others, a vacation. For me, it's learning what new pieces of the puzzle Friends of the Kankakee has assembled since last the Earth completed its trip 'round the sun.

Friends' singular mission is the growth of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area – a refuge they quite literally created with the donation of a bit over 66 acres to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2016. For over 25 years, with the unceasing support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, Friends' has been methodically stitching together that future refuge the only way you can...lot by lot. Because, you see, almost the *entire* site is a platted, largely unbuilt residential subdivision. There are precious few organizations (or people) with both the ability and patience to devote *decades* to working with hundreds of landowners. That map you see to the right shows what such dedication can do. The acquisition last year of seven lots totaling 2.9 acres brings FOK's cumulative land protected to 341.7 acres – every inch of which will eventually be incorporated into the federal Refuge for the benefit and enjoyment of all.



✿ Grand Prairie Friends

3) There were so many ways I could have started this description. I could've focused on the expansion of a site registered with the Illinois Nature Preserves system. I had the option of calling back to GPF's unparalleled reforestation initiatives or extolling the diverse partners who came together to make it a reality. But I didn't. I put that all aside, because each pales when set against three words. "*Photos of Edna.*" On the eve of his 98th birthday, that was all Mr. Ralph Burnett requested. Photos of Edna. Five years earlier, Mr. Burnett had donated 20 acres to create the Edna Edwards Burnett Land & Water Reserve – named in honor of his mother. The Embarras River flows through the property near the southern border of Champaign County, with the floodplain extending out in both directions. To the east lies 59.2 acres over which Mr. Burnett retained ownership and which in his closing years he and his family worked to unite with the preserve that bears his mother's name.



Edna Edwards Preserve
(GPF)

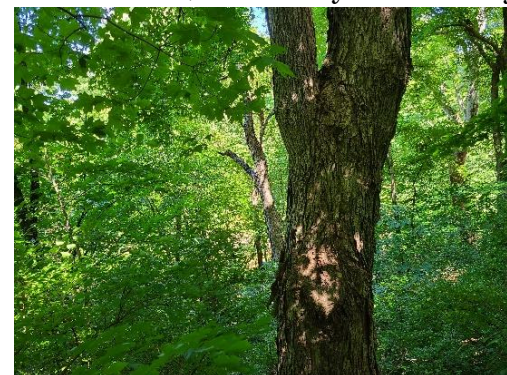
Mostly farmland, the property was viewed by all involved not for what it is, but what it *could be*. Surveys over the spring and summer of last year revealed the presence of both Tricolored bats and either Indiana or Little Brown bats – all either threatened or endangered – within a 3-mile radius, while the land itself is at the edge of a riverine woodland. Longtime readers will recall that GPF is second to none when the task turns to planting trees. Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and ***Brookfield Energy***, that's precisely what they'll do here, with both foundation and company funding a multidecade reforestation project that will begin this spring.



More of the Edna Edwards Preserve, now with artistic lens flares. (Grand Prairie Friends)

✿ Heartlands Conservancy

4) Take a look at the map of this project. Not what you were expecting, right? I mean, it could almost be an outlot of that neighboring subdivision. Hm... Maybe it's adjacent to a really high quality natural site? A high quality parking lot maybe, yes, but not a natural area. Now I'm going to blow your freakin' mind. This was one of the most important land protection projects of 2021. What???



A hidden mound (*Heartlands*)

How's that possible? Because conservation is a broad tent, including not only the natural world, but history. And history defines this new 5.6 acre preserve in East St. Louis. Small and isolated though it is today, the land contains a mound built during the Mississippian period, meaning it was part of a larger community. As an archeological site, its protection was a priority for Heartlands. Think of these properties as akin to native prairie. They're just as rare and just as important.



5) We're moving a bit to the north as we visit Chouteau Island along the eastern bank of the Mississippi River. The island is home to the 1,085.6-acre Lewis and Clark State Historic Site and the appropriately named 2,117.4-acre Chouteau Island State Fish and Wildlife Area; both owned by the Illinois DNR. The historic site [commemorates](#) Camp Dubois, where the expedition prepped from December 1803 through the spring of 1804 before commencing their moderately well-known continental trek.

The Fish and Wildlife Area is the impressive result of a multi-organizational effort in the early years of the century that envisioned the island – just east of St. Louis and connected to both Missouri and Illinois via a bike & pedestrian bridge – as a vast recreational resource in the heart of this major metropolitan center. The new heavily wooded and wet 24.7-acre Chouteau Island Preserve is hoped to be the first of many acquisitions that will add to the existing state lands, turning vision into reality.



6) Heartlands Conservancy has closed on at least one new conservation easement in every single year that I've been writing this report, a feat matched by... no one. Like, at all. The streak continued last year with a fantastic project protecting 55.6 acres of forest in southeastern Jackson County on the outskirts of Carbondale. The young woodland that covers most of the property has grown up through the dedication and commitment of the landowners, who have, over many years, patiently restored what was once largely an open pasture used to graze cattle into the mixed forest – a mix of deciduous and pine – that exists today. Oh, also, their home, which is found on the property, does its part to mitigate globally rising temperatures via a geothermal heating system, which I for one think is neat.



7) In the previous edition of this annual missive, I wrote the closing chapter of a story that began in 2018 with the acquisition by The Nature Conservancy with support from the Illinois DNR's Incidental Take Authorization Program of 9.6 acres of sand prairie and ephemeral ponds that provide habitat for the state threatened [Illinois Chorus Frog](#), bordering the Illinois DNR's 43.3 Sand Road Mitigation Area with which it shares a common purpose in protecting the rare creature. Heartlands subsequently assumed ownership of the preserve, committing to its permanent protection and management.



And that was that. Done. Finished. Moving on...Or so I thought. Nope! That little frog is extremely reliant on a sand prairie/wetland ecosystem. This is not particularly common, and so neither is the frog. In fact, it's so **un**common, and the remaining habitat so diminished that, as I've written previously in describing this project, *the original Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, a document not known for articulating hard, quantifiable*



Poag Sand Prairie (Heartlands)

objectives, specifically called for the restoration and management “of ephemeral wetlands and accompanying upland sand prairie habitat” in this part of the state to be “restored and managed for Illinois chorus frogs.” It's because of this unusual confluence of geology and fauna that I was psyched to see the preserve grow by 8.5 acres last year; an addition that includes a breeding pond used by the diminutive yet vocal amphibian.

✿ Illinois Audubon Society

8) I don't think many would argue with the assertion that Illinois Audubon is well known as a tireless advocate for the protection of birds and other wildlife, but as a partner to many of those reading this report, as a public educator, and as owner and manager of nature preserves across the state. What you might *not* know is that they also have a decades-long tradition of purchasing and holding properties for local governments until the latter can secure funds to bring these lands into public ownership. That invaluable service was on prominent display last year with the acquisition of 3.15 acres south of Chicago in the Will County city of Joliet. Purchased with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the heavily wooded property will eventually be incorporated into the adjacent 506-acre Pilcher Park, most of which has been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve. That last bit likely makes clear why both IAS and the Foundation found this such an engaging project!



9) When you're the world's premier avian conservation organization, you can't really ignore the prairie chicken. It'd be like Val Jean without Javier. Holmes without Watson. *The Princess Bride* without Inigo Montoya. In other words, [inconceivable](#). So yeah, bringing back and protecting the humble bird kinda has to be high on your to-do list. The two Prairie Ridge State Natural Areas in Marion and Jasper Counties respectively are IAS' answer to this challenge. In partnership with the IDNR, they've been working for decades to care for this once common grassland bird. A small 2-acre addition to the 1,352-acre Prairie Ridge-Marion SNA both continues and reinforces 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.



10) Lee County hardly has a dearth of first rate natural areas, but even amongst this exalted company, the 321 acre Amboy Marsh stands apart. A dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, the marsh anchors a growing network of preserved lands south of the city from which it takes its name. In the waning weeks of the year the marsh grew by almost a quarter with the purchase of 76.4 acres (79.2 gross acres) whose ecological quality was recognized by no less than the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory – an addition that, as it happens, came almost a year to the day after another expansion





Amboy Marsh (IAS)

detailed in last year's report. In contrast with much of the original site, the addition contains a plethora of sand woodlands and savannas interspersed by wet sand prairie and small wetlands, all of which are well placed for restoration. That renewal is possible because of a bequest from two greathearted supporters of the Society; theirs is a legacy that will redound through generations.

Quick side note. Last year I discussed a 161.6-acre farm that the Society was gifted by a generous donor. At the time, I was operating with the understanding that the land would be retained and used as a revenue generator. That was erroneous on my part; the site was sold in 2021, with the sale providing said revenue to fund IAS' work. Since the property wasn't held and acquired for conservation, I've removed it from the total acreage protected in 2020. FYI!

✿ Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

11) Over 95% of the land in Illinois is privately owned. Mull that factoid over in your mind for a moment. All of the state's putatively major preserves; Midewin, over half a dozen National Wildlife Refuges, the County Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts, even the Shawnee National Forest fit on 5% of the state's area. A lot less than 5% actually, since that number also includes land used for stuff like municipal buildings, R&D, corrections, storage, etc.

Fascinating, but why are you talking about this Dave? Because it vividly demonstrates a fact that folks in this field often forget. That preserving, *let alone* restoring the state's natural communities **must**, by definition be a holistic effort with public institutions, nonprofit organizations, and private landowners all taking a major role. And it's the dedication of private landowners that makes this project an example for the whole state. Upland forest in the south of the 96.8-acre Acorn Hollow easement northeast of the City of Galena transitions to over 40 acres of former agricultural fields that the landowner has spent years restoring to prairie and savanna and that will now be protected forever by the easement, alongside several fields that remain in production. On top of everything else, the property is less than half a mile from another JDCF easement of 69.4 acres, discussed in the 2017 edition of this report.



✿ Lake Forest Open Lands Association

12) The 50.3-acre Derwen Mawr preserve (with another 22 acres protected via easement) contains that most elusive of habitat – small patches of remnant prairie, interspersed with wetlands. As should surprise no one reading this, the land was eminently qualified for inclusion in the Illinois Nature Preserves system, to which it acceded in 1992 through the joint efforts of LFOLA and The Nature Conservancy, which had recognized the land's irreplaceable value early on and participated in its protection.



Derwen Mawr (LFOLA)

Not content with simply *maintaining* what remained, early in the new century the Association began restoring the degraded portions of the preserve; removing invasive flora and seeding the land with plants native to the state. That work now includes a new 1.5 acre stretch of former and future prairie – an addition that will itself soon be dedicated as Nature Preserve, ensuring that the newly expanded grassland will forever serve as both sanctuary and inspiration.



13) Florsheim Nature Preserve, in southeastern Lake County is 107.3 acres of dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve goodness; part of a complex of nearly 850 acres that've been granted the state's highest form of protection in recognition of their exceptional ecological quality. That number is now pushing the millenary mark through the vision and dedication of both LFOLA and an altruistic donor via the new 100-acre (102.2 acres if you include ROWs) Westfork Savanna. Stretching south from Florsheim and bordering the Village of Lincolnshire and the City of Lake Forest, the preserve is proven or likely host to over half a dozen rare and otherwise high priority birds, reptiles, insects and amphibians.



Westfork Savanna (LFOLA)

14) Established in 1989, Lake Forest Open Land's West Skokie Nature Preserve is 24.2 acres of restored prairie, savanna, and wetlands in the heart of Lake Forest, buffered by a small conservation easement on the east and their 17-acre Westleigh Preserve to the north. I can feel your eyes glazing over, but here's why that's important – this network of sites is part of a far larger whole; West Skokie itself is pretty much the median of a seven mile long protected corridor along the Middlefork of the North Branch of the Chicago River.



West Skokie Preserve Addition (LFOLA)

That sort of connectivity doesn't come about by chance (especially in heavily developed suburban Chicagoland). Nope, it came about because this is a preservation initiative the Association has been leading since the Reagan administration. After a multidecade quest, that full corridor is now linked thanks to a 4.4-acre never-developed residential lot containing an open field and riverine wetland that connects the Preserve with land owned by the

municipal park district to the south. Straddling the aforementioned and lengthily named river (also known simply as the West Skokie, hence the preserve's name), the property was the missing link in that corridor. An existing trail that runs the length of the preserve can now be extended south through the LFOLA-managed municipal land; a true public-private partnership if I ever saw one.

✿ McHenry County Conservation Foundation

15) Eight lines of text. That's how long each of these project descriptions needs to reach in order to wrap around the pretty maps. A lot of times, this means I'm fishing for content, desperately looking for something halfway interesting to talk about... .. This is not one of those times. What makes this 121-acre property – adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's 1,620.6-acre Brookdale Conservation Area to which it will eventually be added *and* in close proximity to a 56-acre easement held by The Land Conservancy of McHenry County – such a content bonanza? Let's start with the remnant oak groves – yes, that's plural – that cover fully half of the site. On top of *and completely independently* of that, the property is home to almost the entirety of a marsh ecosystem identified in the INAI. Like, I could write a paean around either of those, but to have both together? That's just an embarrassment of ecological riches. It should be



no surprise that the Foundation, in partnership with the Illinois Audubon Society and supported by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** made its permanent protection such a priority. And this one isn't over yet. Check back next year for the next phase of the project; a conservation easement over an additional piece of the larger property that will be held by a local land trust.



Future Brookdale Addition (*Brad Semel*)

✿ Natural Land Institute

16) *Way* back in 2019, as longtime readers may recall, I geeked out over 40 acres of high-quality fen that NLI had purchased the previous year along Raccoon Creek northwest of Rockford in Winnebago County near the state line. The creek (technically a tributary of the Pecatonica River, but not really, since the Pecatonica empties into the Rock less than a mile downstream) is itself in unusually rude ecological health. Coupled with an adjacent 130ish acres of wetlands enrolled in the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Wetlands Reserve Program, this made for a solid ecological block.



Raccoon Creek (*NLI*)

Ah, but you see, this was simply a beginning. The Illinois portion of the Raccoon Creek watershed has been identified by NLI as a priority for protection, given both its vitality and potential for restoration. The ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** agreed, and with their support the Institute last year acquired an eye-watering 349.1 acres (356.7 gross acres) as an addition to the existing fen.

Protecting a good 1.5 miles of the meandering, completely un-channelized Creek, the forested wetlands along the waterway transition to a series of agricultural fields that are interspersed with wide, 150-300' vegetated strips planted as part of the property's

longtime enrollment in the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Conservation Reserve Program. NLI will further restore the site to its natural condition by clearing the wetlands of invasives and stabilizing the streambank. The eastern agricultural fields will be returned to the wetlands that historically flowed out from the river, while the western fields will be planted to prairie. So, yeah. This was a pretty major project!

17) Last year I discussed the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation's new and innovative green burial program; the Casper Creek Natural Cemetery, situated on 16.1 acres overlooking the Mississippi River. To ensure the permanent protection of what is now hallowed ground, the Foundation worked with NLI to place the entire cemetery into a conservation easement. Though not large by any extent, the property will have a number of distinct vegetative communities. A small mesic forest gives way to mesic and dry-mesic prairie (some extant, the rest to be part of a restoration initiative) that in turn is cut through by a narrow stream that gives the site its name. Two burial areas within the prairie are connected via trails to the adjacent Casper Bluff Preserve, providing a quiet, natural respite for visitors paying their respects to their departed loved ones.



18) While most of us were prepping for the holidays, NLI was taking the first steps towards expanding the 2,373-acre Mississippi Palisades State Park overlooking the mighty Mississippi in northwestern Carroll County. The forested, ravine-filled Park narrows considerably as it moves south, which is fine. However, you know what would be great? If it *didn't* do that; there're a lot woodland birds that need plenty of unbroken forestland to breed after all. And that's precisely what the new 56-acre White Wood Ridge Farm preserve helps address. Bordering the state land on two sides and acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, this steeply wooded forest is paired in the north with an agricultural field that will eventually be restored to woodland, with the entire site likely being transferred to the DNR within the next two or three years.



Mississippi Palisades (NLI)

✿ Openlands

19) Peat is super common across the globe, covering a tad under 3% of dry land, but for those not channeling their inner Wordsworth by roaming the English countryside, it's probably also pretty unfamiliar, being found mostly in the far north (not exclusively. Just mostly). Partially decayed plant matter that's historically been used as building material and around these parts is found primarily in the few bogs that dot the landscape – the waterlogged nature of the sites slowing decomposition – peat holds a lot of carbon. Like, *a lot*, making it an inordinately deep carbon sink. This spongelike characteristic has a corresponding flip side. Destroying peat is really, really bad, because doing so releases that massive store of carbon.



So protecting peatland is what I humbly deem to be rather important. And that's exactly what Openlands did last year, with the purchase of 178.8 acres of peat wetland, pasture, and an agricultural field – all of which will be restored – on the Wisconsin border as a future addition to the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. Adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's 181.8-acre Hebron Peatland and in one of the Refuge's Core areas, the high-quality wetland – purchased with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, is *also* home to the finest sedges the District's long serving (and, in my experience, peerless) Director of Land Preservation & Natural Resources has *ever* seen.

Separately, Openlands also closed on 75.9 genuinely exciting acres on the western side of the County. The land trust isn't quite ready to talk about that one yet as some details are still being worked out, so I'll be reviewing it a year from now. Consider this something to look forward to in 2023.

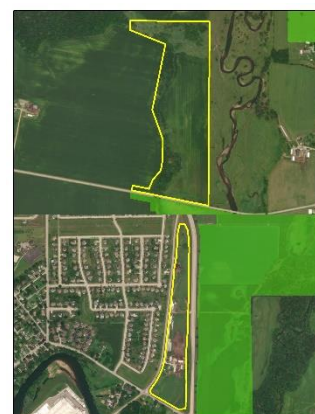
20) Last year I discussed a new preserve east of the City of Belvidere created in a collaboration between Openlands and the Boone County Conservation District and made possible by the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and a generous landowner who donated part of the value of the site. Those who say history may rhyme but never repeats have been proven wrong, as 2021 saw these



Northern Unit (*Openlands*)

four partners protect an *additional* 89.5 acres in two sites. Separated by ~2.5

miles, the northern 61.7 acres were added to the 123.7-acre Funderburg North Conservation Area. The southern 27.8 acres serve as a valuable addition to the 335.3-acre similarly named Funderburg South



Conservation Area. Just as with the earlier project, Openlands purchased both properties from the landowner, selling them to the District while retaining a conservation easement governing the terms of the land's restoration and protecting the habitat on each in perpetuity.

21) The Garfield Farm and Inn Museum is, to the best of my knowledge, one of a kind. A recreated 1840s-era prairie farmstead, this expansive site in the heart of suburban Chicagoland offers a hands-on window into the Kane County of almost two centuries ago, pairing agricultural history with adjacent quality natural areas. It's that combination that best defines a new 64.343-acre easement on the western edge of the property – the third such agreement between the Museum and Openlands in a partnership spanning 40 years. Agricultural fields buffer a sedge meadow and prairie rolling off of Mill Creek – a tributary of the Fox River – as it flows



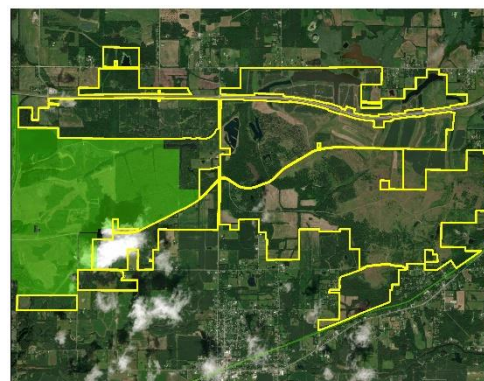
Garfield Farm in the Winter (*Openlands*)



through the property. This particular portion of the creek is home to at least 13 species of fish. Now, admittedly a baker's dozen of fishies isn't in itself so special. What *is* special is that one of those 13 is the state threatened Iowa darter. Its discovery in late 2017 represents the first time the small fish has been identified *anywhere* in the lower reaches of the Fox basin.

✿ Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever

22) There's no real way to understate this; Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever has assumed ownership of what is sort of, kind of... the single largest conservation easement in Illinois – covering an unprecedented 5,750.8 acres. Actually, it's 59 separate easements created simultaneously* that form a more or less cohesive whole. Almost all of the easements are found in Saline County, with two in neighboring Williamson County, and are similarly clustered around the 3,998-acre Sahara Woods State Fish and Wildlife Area.



A mix of woodlands, lakes, and farmland, the land is home to deer, turkeys, and my personal favorite – bobcats, [alongside](#), for the bird lovers among you, ducks, geese, vultures and blue herons. Much of the property was mined for coal in years gone by.

Following the conclusion of mining operations, the owner began the long task of restoring the land. Once that rather massive task was completed, the property was encumbered by the aforementioned 59 easements in 2014** – granted to a nonprofit land trust specifically created for the purpose – and subsequently sold in pieces at auction. That newly created land trust was never meant as a permanent home for the easements, leading them to partner with Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever which will now ensure that the land remains forever open, offering produce for a growing nation and habitat for southern Illinois' bountiful wildlife.

* Yes, yes I did have to map each of them one by one and yes, by the end of that process I was indeed longing for the sweet embrace of death, thank you for asking.

** Since the land trust that previously held the easements was essentially a holding company, I never knew the things existed until they were transferred to Pheasants/Quail, and so they've never shown up in that bar graph I lead this section off with each year. So now those of you who wondered why the 2014 figure leapt into the stratosphere in this edition of the report have your answer.

✿ **Prairie Land Conservancy**

23) Sorry to say, but not many of us are going to have legacies of any lasting significance once we're gone. Mine, whatever it might be, will be a pale shadow when set against that of those who conserve natural land for all generations yet to come. Two generous landowners in Warren County have done just that with the donation of 3.2 acres of woodland on the northern end of the City of Monmouth. Adjacent to the 231.2-acre Monmouth Park and Gibson Woods Golf Course, this small mostly mesic and wet-mesic forest has been so effectively managed that the invasive flora that typically overflow at such sites is found only sporadically. Instead, red oak, shagbark hickory, sugar, basswood, hackberry and ash predominate in the mesic woods, giving way to pin oak, honey locust, boxelder and river birch along a small stream. Rounding things out, an open grassland in the northeast hosts a variety of grasses and sedges; a marked and in my opinion welcome contrast from the dandelions and turf grass that mark most suburban lots.



24) On a completely different note, in 2014 the Conservancy acquired the 543.1-acre Prairie Hills Wetland Preserve outside the Village of Banner in Fulton County. At the time, there was a small 0.5-acre parcel at the southeast corner of the site owned by the grantor but missed in the survey that formed the basis for the agreement between the two parties. About half the site is wetland and the other half is underwater entirely. Subsequently acquired by the County for nonpayment of taxes (because there was absolutely no reason for the former landowner to keep paying taxes on property that, for all they knew, they'd sold), the land was finally added to the preserve early last year.



✿ The Conservation Foundation

25) In honor of the late Alex Trebek, I present you with the answer: “This 129-acre preserve with 35 acres of woodland and the rest in agriculture was the single largest land protection project of 2021 in this County.” You better hope that answer wasn’t behind a Daily Double square, because I guarantee you got it wrong. The question? “What is Kane County?” That’s right kids; 129 acres in the fastest growing locale in the whole of Chicagoland.



We’re not talking the rural outskirts either. The new preserve, divided by a public road, is in the middle of the Village of Campton Hills. The northern portion is adjacent to the Campton Open Space District’s 220.2-acre Corron Farm which in turn is adjacent to a 620.4-acre Forest Preserve District site, while the southern is less than half a mile from another 206-acre Township preserve. And that’s no accident. Acquired as a connector, the Township hopes to eventually purchase the site from the Foundation, as the two work together to create a mega-site in the heart of the County.



Fields ‘n Forests (TCF)

26) We transition for this next one from a Township nature preserve to something a bit more intimate. Veteran’s Park is a narrow public space lying north of a rail line that’s pretty much smack dab in the middle of the Village of Minooka; on the border of Grundy, Will, and Kendall Counties. A small 0.94-acre property lying immediately to the east of the park is the only commercial site on the north side of the railroad tracks, opposite a residential community. The Village looked at said property and saw not the packed earth and commercial buildings of its current incarnation, but a future extension of its popular municipal park. By acquiring the property, which may eventually be sold or otherwise deeded to the municipality, TCF was happy to help make that vision a reality.



27) If growing one municipal park is good, expanding two, and in the same year at that, is better. And that's exactly what happened in the Village of Plainfield, northwest of Joliet. The Plainfield Township Park District has assembled a string of public spaces along the lower DuPage River as it flows towards its meeting with the Des Plaines. A large gap between these parks is almost entirely filled by a 7.6-acre parcel that will also, once it's eventually deeded to the public agency, facilitate the expansion of the Village's river trail that further serves to link these places together. The former homesite is mostly wooded, with a solid 1,500 feet of frontage along the river.



Stitching together a river trail (*Google Street View*)

✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

28) The Roaring Twenties were, as the name suggests, a wild and crazy time. Speakeasies. Gangsters. Soaring stock markets. Whatever the heck [this](#) is. It was also when a small wetland on the Illinois/Wisconsin border, in a bout of postwar agricultural euphoria, was tiled and put under the plough. That worked great for decades, successfully seeing the formerly inundated site through multiple civilizational tragedies including but not limited to the Great Depression, World War II, and disco. Eventually though, the tiles failed and nature returned with a vengeance, filling much of the depression with water and creating a small 1.4-acre wetland



Land that is quite wet indeed. (*TLC*)

and buffer community. Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the McHenry County Stormwater Management Commission, the landowner actively restored the land to its former state, which will now be forever protected by The Land Conservancy through the granting of a conservation easement over the once again waterlogged site.

29) It's not often that someone donates a conservation easement and then comes back to *expand* it. That's not hyperbole; you should know by now that I don't do that sort of thing. It seriously is really uncommon. What's completely *unheard* of though is expanding an easement and then outright donating the entire property, retaining a life estate. And yet that's exactly what two visionary supporters of TLC have done; the capstone of decades of dedication to and support of conservation across McHenry County.



The 5.6-acre property near the Wisconsin border was previously subject to an easement over its southern extent, with the expansion adding a bit over an acre. Taken together with the donation of the entire parcel, 3.5 acres were placed under permanent protection for the first time as a result of these twin agreements. And what exactly is being protected? Though not large, the parcel manages to take in a stretch of Alden Creek alongside remnant oak woodlands, and adjoins existing publicly and privately protected land on three sides. More broadly, the property – with house, heated garage, workshop and barn in close proximity to several TLC easements as well as their Crowley Oaks Preserve – offers a wealth of possible future uses as the Conservancy manages its diverse and growing portfolio of conservation properties across the County.

✿ The Nature Conservancy

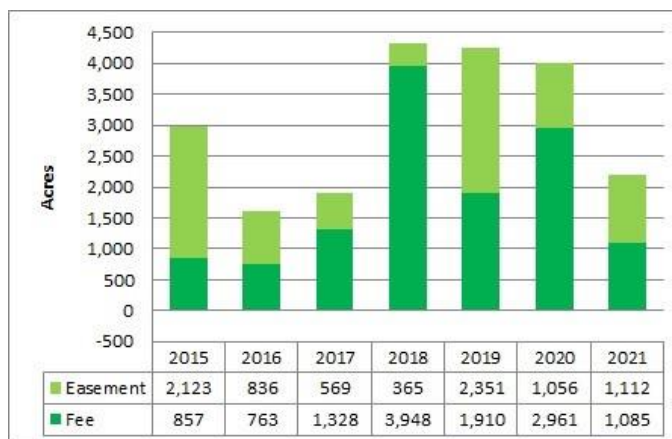
30) What hasn't said about the Nachusa Grasslands? Seriously; that's not a rhetorical question. I'm fresh out of bon mots, but have to come up with something interesting to write each time this singular, trail blazing site grows yet further. "Grows" is probably the operative word here, because upon reflection, it's that very growth (and the truly stellar management team) that's enabled the preserve to play the multiple roles that've simultaneously inspired and intrigued me over the past six years that I've been writing this report. With 3,695.8 acres under fee ownership and another 720.4 acres protected by conservation easements, it's the scale of the place that's empowered it to play host to experiments and field studies that've changed at least *my* understanding of restoration ecology. It's that same scale that led the Preserve to become home to Illinois' first herd of wild bison after a 200-year absence. All of these initiatives have yet more space in which to expand with the addition of 117.3 acres on the northeastern corner of the grassland. Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the property is in agricultural production, bordering a 287-acre easement to the south and the main body of the preserve to the west.





Public Sector Land Conservation

In a year of skyrocketing land costs that began with no small amount of budgetary uncertainty, government at all levels excelled at identifying and preserving lands that open up new opportunities for their citizens to enjoy the state's natural inheritance while simultaneously purifying its waters and providing space for the natural world to thrive – protecting 2,197.3 acres over the course of the year. 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 (there are a number of those this year). Similarly, if a project was the result of a public-private partnership, each party received credit for one half of the property's total acreage.



The standouts of the year were without question the Forest Preserve District of Will County – which was singlehandedly responsible for over 50% of the land acquired in 2021 – and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, which set a record over the time I've been writing these for the sheer number of projects completed in a single year. They were joined by over half a dozen other local and federal agencies with projects both large and small!



Starved Rock State Park (*Illinois DNR – Wikimedia Commons*)

✿ Boone County Conservation District

1) We're starting off with a good one here people. As briefly discussed above in the "Private Sector" section, the District, with the support of Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, Openlands, and the farsighted landowner acquired 89.5 acres in two units near the City of Belvidere. The northern unit, of 61.7 acres, lies just a few hundred feet west of Piskasaw Creek (a tributary of the Kishwaukee River) – which, as long-time readers know, is super high-quality, and one of my all-time favorite waterways in the good Prairie State. ~60% of the site was removed from agricultural production five years ago and has since begun reverting to a wet mesic prairie...significantly helped along by some interseeding this past year! That prairie transitions to a wet forest/sedge meadow in the north, bisected by a small feeder stream, while the western border is defined by a slender oak-hickory woodland. The District will be installing parking and a trail system on the site, which is part of the Funderburg North Conservation Area that continues to its south.



Taking baseline photos in January is fun! (*D. Holman for Openlands*)

Public use is the name of the game on the southern unit; an addition to the new Funderburg South Conservation Area we covered last year. This 27.8-acre property is sandwiched between three major public roads, directly east of the aforementioned City of Belvidere. The District is converting a former homestead into both a destination and jumping off point for residents. With parking, a picnic shelter, water, and paved walking paths surrounded by former pasture that will be restored to prairie, this western outpost will serve as an easily accessible trailhead for an extensive walking and biking path that will run east connecting with the main body of the preserve near Piskasaw Creek and running thence north and east through restored prairie and wetlands. See? I *told* you we were starting off strong.

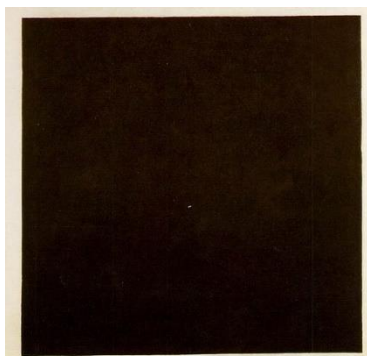
✿ Forest Preserve District of Cook County

2) A lot of the protected natural lands in Illinois are akin to islands in a vast ocean; one of towns and cities, corn and soybeans. The folks at the Forest Preserve District have often taken a different approach, with preserves strung out like pearls along the County's major waterways. Thorn Creek is an exemplar of this philosophy in action. 24.2 acres of woodland in the Village of Glenwood (south of Chicago about four miles from the Indiana border) join a network of preserves encompassing several thousand additional acres that are also mostly forested. The waterway around which this large assemblage is organized enters the site from the east, merging with its meandering tributary Butterfield Creek and turning north to continue its journey through the Preserves as it flows towards the Calumet River.



✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

3-4) We begin with a small addition to a big site, on the border of the City of Wood Dale in the northeastern corner of the Co... in the northeastern corner of the Coun... I'm sorry, I can't do this. I just can't do it. Recall that last year after a careful and reasoned analysis, I came to the realization that the Forest Preserve Districts in the collar counties were methodically, collectively, and quite intentionally working to drive me to insanity by making innumerable acquisitions across Chicagoland that were each an acre or less in size, and then sitting back – presumably in the company of people in white lab coats – to watch as I tried to come up with new and interesting things to say about each. The experiment continued in 2021 with *two* such projects in DuPage County. The first is a one acre homesite on the southern end of the Fullersburg Woods Preserve. The second, also a single acre with an existing home, this one an inholding on the south end of Songbird Slough, which surrounds it on three sides. And that is all I can say about that!



This painting of a black square that I'm told is worth \$60M+ hanging in a museum in Moscow is a metaphor for my will to live whenever I learn of the need to come up with yet another witty description of a miniscule parcel. (*Wikimedia Commons*)

5) The 1,371-acre Blackwell preserve bordering the cities of Warrenville and West Chicago was something of a star of the 2020 report, featuring the re-meandering of a mile of Spring Brook Creek and the removal of a former landfill incorporated into the refuge from the Superfund list after three decades of remediation. We now turn our attention from restoration to enlargement, as last year that increasingly healthy and popular site added 9.7 acres of forest and wooded wetlands on its northwestern side (over half of the new property is part of the floodplain), taking the preserve to the edge of a public road and so simplifying management of the whole tract.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

6) This annual retrospective wouldn't be complete without a good ole' tax sale. For anyone joining me this year for the first time, tax sales are awesome tools for land conservation. What's a tax sale? Exactly what it sounds like. So, when you own property, you've gotta pay an annual property tax. If you don't, the local authorities get a bit miffed, and the unpaid taxes go up for sale at a yearly shindig. If you don't pay your back taxes and fees within three years, the folks who bought 'em (i.e., paid the amount owed) get to petition the County government to transfer to them title to the property. This nifty system saw small additions to two equally small District sites last year in the eastern side of the County near the City of South Elgin; a 0.1-acre property added to the scattered 9.8-acre Riverbend Parcels, and 0.046 acres (i.e., about 2,000 square feet) added to the nearby and also scattered 3.6-acre Valleyview Lots.



7) As weeks became months last year, an unsettling thought percolated to the surface of my consciousness. Had the record-breaking annual expansion of the Binnie Forest Preserve come to an end? A question with obviously eschatological implications, the answer turned out to be a resounding "No". A 77.2-acre property at the northwestern corner of what is now a 499-acre Preserve (that itself is adjacent to several hundred acres of other publicly and privately protected lands) brings these annual additions to the half decade mark; it's grown every single year for the last five. In common with its predecessors, this newest addition is part of what was once a wetland complex draining into an upstream tributary of a branch of the Kishwaukee River. Drain tiles throughout the site will be disabled, and the whole place restored to its original role – and its original glory.



8) The Oakhurst Forest Preserve – in the City of Aurora on the border with neighboring Du Page County – has an interesting history. Back in the day, the Powers That Be observed that the expanding municipality had a somewhat adversarial relationship with rain – specifically with large amounts of rain. The result was a 46 acre lake excavated in the preserve to serve as flood control and a water detention system that today offers residents fishing and boating opportunities. All that dirt had to go somewhere, and in this case, that somewhere was directly south of the lake, creating what is today a prime sledding hill... ..A 0.17-acre addition to the 394 acre site has nothing whatsoever to do with any of that. The northwestern corner of the preserve features over half a dozen small blocks of woods and wetlands that are separated from the main body of the site. The small parcel links two of those blocks together into a single whole. That's about it for this one. And I will thank the good Commissioners of Kane County to stop purchasing small additions to this property just to see if I can come up with something to say about them (don't think I forgot that y'all also did this in 2020).



9) We conclude our time in Kane County by looking southwest to the Village of Big Rock and the Forest Preserve of the same name. As I've discussed previously, 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.



Future prairie. Present farm. (*Google Street View*)

✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

10) Thorn Creek Woods is *complicated*. Oh, not ecologically; it's a diverse mix of forest, prairie, savanna, wetland and its namesake waterway, yes, but nothing unheard of. I'm talking politically. The varying portions of the 1,007-acre site have historically been owned by four different governments; the Forest Preserve, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and two municipalities. Last year, having determined this was perhaps needlessly complex, the DNR and Forest Preserve District worked together to transfer 473.66 acres from state to county. Acquired over an eight-year period from 1975 to '83, the heavily wooded property has long been managed by the District. Given that it's a vibrant dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, they've clearly been doing something right, making the Forest Preserve a worthy custodian of this longstanding preserve.



11) Forked Creek winds its way through the preserve which bears its name south of the City of Wilmington shortly before emptying into the Kankakee River. The expansive preserve features an assorted mix of forests, wetlands, and agricultural fields. Historically though, it also featured something else. A ginormous gap, separating the preserve into two distinct units. But no more! 157.5 acres of wetlands, agricultural fields, the all-important river and, for good measure, a remnant oak grove link the two pieces into a single coherent whole of 932.5 acres. The property has been a high priority for the District for many years as not only does it unify the preserve, its acquisition also opens up an opportunity to link Wilmington to the Wauponsee Glacial Trail running 22 miles from the Kankakee River north to Joliet.

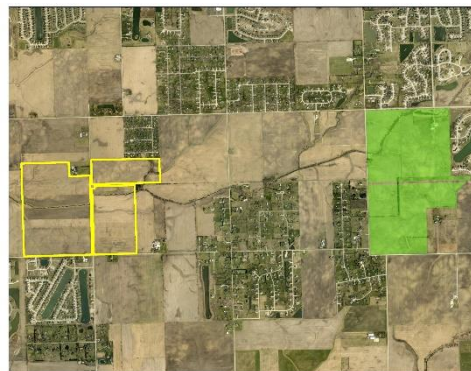


12) Last year I led off the discussion of the Forest Preserve's accomplishments by extolling the expansion of Moeller Woods in the northeastern corner of the County. Little did I know that it marked the first step in linking two first rate sites; Moeller and Plum Valley. The Plum Valley Preserve was 453 acres of forest and wetland, agricultural fields and grasslands, all bestride Plum Creek, which flows the length of the site. To that has now been added a 35.5-acre former tree nursery, the owners of which reached out to the District upon their decision to retire. The addition is also home to a large maintenance barn that'll be repurposed as the District's Operations Substation for the eastern half of the County.



Before closing, it's worth recalling that Plum Valley and Moeller Woods are themselves part of a larger whole; pearls in a necklace of preserves extending from Will County north into neighboring Cook and now totaling over 4,000 near contiguous acres.

13-15) I've talked a lot in this section about stitching together preserves that are so close together they're nearly touching. We go now to the other extreme, with a 203.3-acre addition to the Jackson Creek Preserve...an addition that's a solid *two miles* west of the original, 366.7-acre site. That's not all though. For those hard to please folks out there, shortly after its purchase the property was joined by two additional tracts totaling *another 153 acres*.



The two units of the preserve, both in agricultural production, are linked by the eponymous creek, flowing through the center of the County. What makes the land so special? Simple. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and the Will County Stormwater Management Planning Committee called out the new as worthy of protection, lying as it does within a rapidly urbanizing area. Similarly, it provides a foundation upon which the Forest Preserve District can expand in order to better serve the many new residents of the surrounding communities.

16) The Theodore Marsh Preserve, straddling the cities of Joliet and Crest Hill in west-central Will County, is another varied site, with both forest and grassland. But it's the titular marsh that defines this 280.9-acre preserve, through which flows Rock Run on its way to the Des Plaines River. A 3.2-acre parcel – mostly an open field but with a small piece of the creek running through it – is a small but welcome addition. As can be seen with a quick glance at the thumbnail map to the right, the commercially-zoned property is host to a small portion of the Rock Run Greenway Trail. By taking ownership of the land, the trail's future is ensured, while also giving the District the ability to refine its alignment to deal with some maintenance and accessibility issues.



This used to merely be leased. Not anymore. (Google Street View)

✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

17) The Department didn't waste any time last year, choosing January to create a brand spanking new preserve in eastern Randolph County south of the Village of Steelville. Bisected by the meandering Rockcastle Creek – a tributary of the Marys River (yep, no apostrophe in 'Marys', so don't send any emails telling me I screwed up) – the land is a mix of forest in the north, gradually transitioning to open grasslands in the south, at least some of which were once in agricultural production. Why no agriculture today? Well,



Rockcastle Creek (IDNR)

the former landowner is a dedicated conservationist, and has been restoring the land for years. And I'm not talking garden-variety restoration; the property is such an excellent example of high quality habitat that everything but the house and immediately surrounding environs have been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, making the 86.4 acre preserve a worthy addition to the Department's expanding portfolio.



18-19) Back in 2019, Pere Marquette State Park crossed a symbolic milestone, surpassing 10,000 wooded and topographically varied acres. Last January, the Department followed this up by adding a massive *fifth of an acre* on the Park's northern extreme, bordered to the north by a public road. Small potatoes you say, but wait, they *also* added **0.4** acres a few hundred feet to the west, bordered by that same road. I know, breathtaking stuff. Fortunately for my effort to find enough material with which to write a solid paragraph here, the Park was shortly thereafter blessed with a wooded 10.2-acre addition on its opposite end, adjacent to the 2019 project. This larger property comes complete with a secluded roadway, providing management access for the first time to much of the expansive site.



Pere Marquette State Park addition (IDNR)

20) Two years ago I wrote about a new preserve established by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation along the east bank of the Apple River connecting two units of the 1,696.5-acre Apple River Canyon State Park (much of the northern unit of which just so happens to be dedicated/registered as an Illinois Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve) The preserve's 332.6 acres are home to over 130 acres of forest, around 50 of savanna, prairie, and grassland, another



Quite a sight, isn't it? (JDCF)

roughly 50 acres of former agricultural land that the Foundation began restoring in 2020 to prairie and grassland, and an additional 85 acres in agricultural production. At the time I explained that the new site "will eventually be sold to the Illinois DNR for integration into the State Park". Guess what? Yep! That didn't take long at all, now did it?



21) Apple River Canyon wasn't the only project that the Department collaborated on with the JDCF last year. Registered as a Land and Water Reserve in 2019, the 162.3-acre Oneota Preserve along the Apple River was deeded to the state as an addition to the 919.2-acre Hanover Bluff State Natural Area in southwestern Jo Daviess County. The SNA is part of the vast (and similarly named) Hanover Bluff macrosite – encompassing land owned by the IDNR, USFWS, and three conservation land trusts – stretching from the Mississippi River east to Illinois Route 84. Mostly in agricultural production at the time of its purchase by the Foundation in 2016, the land has since been undergoing restoration to native prairie and oak savanna.



Apple River at the Hanover Bluff SNA (JDCF)

22) There are inholdings, and then there are inholdings. An addition to the Spring Lake Fish & Wildlife Area in western Tazewell County is one of the latter. An outpost nestled within the public land, the 2.3-acre property lies along a channel on a peninsula of land sandwiched between Spring Lake to the east and the Illinois River to the west. And, um, that's about it. Crap; this description isn't close to being long enough. What was I thinking when I added those blasted



Look! One of those buildings I mentioned! (IDNR)

maps for each project? Stupid word wrapping. Welp, the parcel certainly isn't vacant, containing as it does half a dozen buildings of varying sizes. Looks like it's got some nice ornamental landscaping along the waterway too.

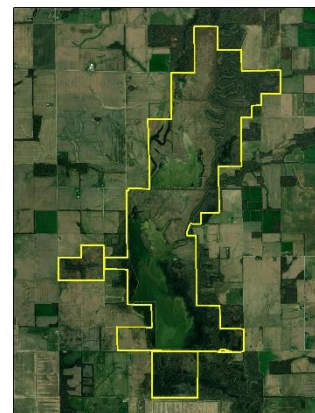


23) Ferne Clyffe State Park is divided into three nearby units stretching from northeastern Union County east into neighboring Johnson. The whole of the westernmost unit – a vast woodland – was registered in the late '90s with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission as a Land & Water Reserve. Why the history lesson? Because the good women and men at IDNR expanded the site by 41.2 acres last year. Almost completely forested itself, the land is complemented by a small agricultural field in its southwestern corner. The woodland on the new property is indistinguishable from that found in the rest of the park, affording a buffer to the Reserve and even more habitat for the critters that call the land home.



Ferne Clyffe State Park addition (IDNR)

24) Those who know me well know that I hate, hate, *hate* talking about myself and, somewhat relatedly, can typically muster at best a few self-deprecating words when pressed to describe what I do. I'm like the worst self-promotor anywhere between the North Atlantic and Hawai'i; it's a mystery how I make my living as an independent consultant/contractor. So, imagine my shock when I found someone even *worse* at talking about their accomplishments than I – the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. They managed last year to create the 2,154.9 acre all new Fox Creek State Fish & Wildlife Area at the border of Richland and Wayne Counties without so much as a press release. No announcements, and no certainly no celebrations. Not even a local news piece. It is – and I swear this is true – easier to find someone defending Season 8 of *Game of Thrones* than it is to find so much as a word published about the largest conservation land purchase of 2021. I know, right?



As you might expect on a property of such size, the new SFWA is home to a wide variety of vegetative communities. It's dominated though by wetlands, lakes, and the meandering Fox River which, taken together, offer abundant habitat for the waterfowl that the preserve was created to protect. All but 69.6 acres of the new property were previously protected by a conservation easement that's held by the Natural Resources Conservation Service as part of the Wetlands Reserve Program (hence the reason the bar chart at the beginning of this section tracking newly protected lands doesn't include most of the property's acreage).

25) I think almost everyone reading this report has a favorite type of project. You might get excited by forests, someone else by wetlands, and yet another person by virgin prairie. Some go in for vast tracts whose natural splendor is matched only by the opportunities they offer for public enjoyment, while others look to that key parcel that finishes a project decades in the making. Me? *My* favorite projects are the ones that were acquired by a nonprofit with the *express purpose* of deeding the land to a public agency a few years hence, because that means I don't have to come up with something new to write, instead cutting and pasting from one of my previous annual opuses. Life is good. And so we come to the erstwhile Dug Hill Preserve.



First acquired in 2019 by The Conservation Fund in part with funding from the DNR's Incidental Take Authorization program, the 282.7-acre property is now the northernmost extension of what was the 6,062.7-acre Union County State Fish & Wildlife Area. The forested portion of the property is quite steep, rising and falling several hundred feet over less than half a mile – creating a topographical wonderland. The agricultural fields covering much of the western half of the site have been undergoing restoration in partnership with HeartLands Conservancy.

Those with keen memories will recall that ecology and connectivity are actually the least interesting things about the land, surpassed in this case by its history. In 1838-39, the Cherokee were the last of five tribes forced by the United States government to cede their lands and migrate westward; one of a series of migrations along routes collectively, aptly, and appropriately known as the [Trail of Tears](#). The trail passed through this site, where travelers originally had to use winches to get their horses and wagons down a steep hill until it was “dug” out to reduce the slope; thus was born the name of the property; Dug Hill.



The Dug Hill (Kingdom Quest Realty)

26) On the subject of history, the year 2017 was witness to a scintillating bureaucratic reorganization with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency being folded into the IDNR. This was no doubt an exciting time for many as they learned how to meld together the management of Lincoln’s Law Offices with that of the Lincoln Trail.



That little history lesson brings us to the Dana Thomas House Historic Site in downtown Springfield. The Dana Thomas House was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, so if we were talking about the house I’d have plenty to write about. But we’re not talking about the Dana Thomas House. It’s been owned and cared for by the state for forty years. This is a piece about the Dana Thomas House [Historic Site](#). And the site grew by 1.4 acres last year with the acquisition of... a nearby building. Also, a parking lot! Well, not a *whole* parking lot, but, like, almost half of one! OK then, moving right along.

27) The creatively named Washington County State Conservation Area is a small site; only 10 acres. But it’s a quality 10 acres, dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. This representative of a southern flatwoods forest has exploded in size with the addition of 120.5 acres of adjacent forest, along with agricultural fields and open grassland.



‘Southern flatwoods’ is not a term many reading this have likely heard before. Flatwoods, as the name suggests, are found on level terrain. This is Illinois, so we’ve got that part covered. What makes it unusual is a hardened soil beneath the surface that prevents accumulated water from draining, leading to an often inundated forest floor during spring and fall. There’re only ~660 identified acres of Grade A or B southern flatwoods forest remaining in the state, so the opportunity to buffer and hopefully expand such an ecosystem is pretty noteworthy.

28) 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*)

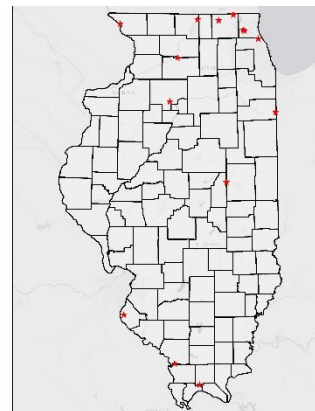
29) Last year I regaled readers with the story of the live auction at which the Illinois Audubon Society won a 39.2-acre property in southern Jasper County. Part of an expansive Illinois Natural Area Inventory site within which lie the many distinct geographic units of the Prairie Ridge-Jasper State Natural Area, the property was purchased as part of a decades-long partnership between the land trust and the DNR to assemble the Natural Area in service of the humble prairie chicken (IAS owns several smaller parcels adjacent to the public land).



Nearly driven to extinction by the classic combo of hunting and habitat loss, the public/private preserve has been specifically restored to address the latter, and today it and a neighboring preserve in nearby Marion County are home to the only breeding population of the [Greater Prairie Chicken](#) in the state. Following the transfer of the IAS-acquired property, the preserve now encompasses 2,705.1 acres; land that's also used by a profusion of other aerial members of the community including Short-eared Owls, Northern Harriers, bitterns and sparrows. It's a site whose growth demonstrably and visibly benefits the state's rarer grassland birds that require large unbroken tracts to truly thrive.

✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

More land was added to the Illinois Nature Preserves system last year than in any since I began writing this annual tome. 2,484.31 acres were dedicated as Nature Preserve/Nature Preserve Buffer or dedicated as Land & Water Reserves, bringing the system to 118,572.6 acres protected across the state. This was led by a huge registration at the IDNR's Cache River State Natural Area in southern Illinois. 1,162.73 acres were dedicated as Nature Preserves or Nature Preserve Buffers, while 1,321.58 were dedicated as Land & Water Reserves.



Just over a fifth of the newly dedicated and registered land is owned by private individuals or nonprofit land trusts, with a small but – because the INPC generally only accepts the best of the best – significant 18.26 acres being protected for the first time. Eight all new Nature Preserves were created while one was expanded. In contrast, the 2020 saw the birth of a single new Land & Water Reserve and the expansion of four. As a reminder for longtime readers and a primer for those just joining me, incorporation into the INPC is the highest form of protection any land can receive, making this as valuable a program as its success is heartening.

✿ Lake County Forest Preserve District

30) For the third year in a row, the Lake County Forest Preserve District has expanded the southwestern corner of the 354.3-acre Duck Farm preserve near the Village of Lake Villa. The entire area is underlain by an Advanced Identification (ADID) Wetland – i.e., the good stuff – that drains north into the preserve, so these modest additions are most assuredly worthwhile. In last year's report, I described a housing lot added to the site via my favorite land protection tool; the County tax sale. The addition gave the District ownership of both sides of an unbuilt roadway right-of-way that they subsequently vacated, incorporating another 0.13 acres into the preserve.



Duck Farm Forest Preserve, complete with ducks (*Lake County Forest Preserves*)

31) My first job, back in High School, was working for the LCFPD in one of their youth programs. I remember driving around with my boss when he offhandedly mentioned a property I'd never heard of; Singing Hills Forest Preserve. The name made it sound like quite a [silly place](#), but that's only because I didn't know the history. The land's former owner had been deeply struck by the cacophony of birds across what was then a country retreat. The District recounts a member of the family describing the future preserve – *"There were so many birds on that land... a Great Blue Heron nest in the trees along the north edge of the farm... pheasants, grouse, songbirds of all kinds. The land was so musical that my father called his farm The Singing Hills."* This 703.7-acre preserve in the Village of Volo grew by 36.9 acres last year with two parcels acquired from the municipality. The first is a narrow stretch of a bit over an acre between the preserve and a major arterial road; really just rationalizing the boundary. The second is a much larger property that's almost entirely covered in those aforementioned ADID Wetlands. Squaring off the preserve, its incorporation should significantly simplify management of the larger semi-aquatic complex while expanding restoration opportunities. A win-win any way you look at it.



32) I'll let you in on a secret. These reports take a tremendous amount of time to write. Also, you think some of the site descriptions sound kinda similar? I assure you, if I tried to craft 50 of 'em in a week and a half, they'd be so clichéd and repetitive you'd think I had a side gig writing talking points for members of Congress. Because that'd be boring to read, I compose the pieces for each report as I learn about a project. With land protection, that's usually after the deal has closed, or at most a few months beforehand.



And then there's Sequoit Creek. Towards the end of 2018 the District reached an agreement to purchase 13.3 acres along said creek as an addition to the east side of the 133.6-acre Forest Preserve of the same name. The agreement included a proviso delaying the closing until 2021 to give the seller the opportunity to continue hunting on the property. Which means I wrote much of what you're currently reading well over three freaking years ago. Let's dive in, 'cause I've been waiting on this one for a *long* time.

Located in northwestern Lake County a short distance from the Wisconsin border, directly south of the Village of Antioch and north of the Village of Lake Villa, the new property is predominantly high quality, Advanced Identification wetlands. Acquisition of the land gives the Forest Preserve District ownership of the entire downstream portion of the Creek after already acquiring most of the area upstream. It's a small addition, but I trust you can see why it was worth the wait.

33-34) The Village of Libertyville has long owned a number of parcels that, quite frankly, don't make much sense for them to hold. Conversely, they make a great deal of sense as part of the Forest Preserve District system. Leaders of both municipality and County recognized this, and so deeded the land from the one to the other, totaling 32.7 acres (32.4 of which are newly protected) in central Lake County as an addition to Wilmot Woods Forest Preserve. The property is divided into two units. The northern, larger unit, part of a 100-year floodplain is a lightly managed woodland bordering a floodtastic residential subdivision, so keeping the land open is a stellar idea. With the Preserve now running to the centerline of the Des Plaines River on the west, the District for the first time can manage the small forest as a coherent whole; another plus. The



Aforementioned lightly managed forest
(David Holman)

southern unit is just under a mile away. This small elongated wooded parcel had two major things to recommend it for addition to the preserve. First, a portion of the Forest Preserve District's County-spanning Des Plaines River Trail already runs through the property. And second, while it borders the Forest Preserve, one thing it does *not* border is any other land owned by the Village, or for that matter any sort of access apart from the trail unless you wanted to dive out the window of a train as it flew by. So, score one for rationalizing property boundaries.

✿ McHenry County Conservation District

35) Nippersink Creek's unbroken and unmatched record of appearing in every edition of this report from the very beginning continues, thanks to the generosity of a private citizen who donated two lots totaling 0.48 acres along the banks of the waterway a few miles north of its mouth at the Fox River as additions to the Nippersink Canoe Base, pushing the site to 332 acres. The Nippersink has long been a focus of the District, and for good reason. Its diversity surpasses most of its Chicagoland peers, and the stream is only growing healthier over time. This portion of the waterway lies around four miles east of Glacial Park – site of two remeandering projects over the last quarter century, including one just two years ago.



✿ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture – U.S. Forest Service

36-37) In 2016's report I described two projects; one a 149.17-acre property in Alexander County and the second a 19.9-acre parcel in Jackson County – both acquired by Heartlands Conservancy with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and the *Grand Victoria Foundation* – explaining that they would eventually be sold to the U.S. Forest Service. It took a while, but the two are now officially part of the Shawnee National Forest, so, good times. To quote from that year's report, the first property consists of “dense forest and open field (the latter of which will be restored to native habitat)...bisected by a drainage ditch running east/west across the land.” The larger property is surrounded on three sides by the Shawnee National Forest, while the smaller is almost completely surrounded by the same. I also noted that that “one of the very neat aspects of this project is that the proceeds of the sale will be used to fund additional acquisitions in the project area”. With the sale of the land to the Forest Service, Heartlands can put this plan into action; I both expect and look forward to discussing future projects made possible through this public-private partnership.



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

38-40) We got a 3 for 1 deal last year in the southwest corner of the state, with three easements protected through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetlands Reserve Easement...program (this name brought to you by the Department of Redundancy Department). The first is a 24.1-acre wooded tract directly west of the Village of Tamms in Alexander County that...doesn't contain many wetlands, actually. Eh, whatever; it's all good. The second, also in the good County of Alexander, is a 312.2-acre property on the state's southern border along the Mississippi River that's the polar opposite of its predecessor. There's a bit of land, but a majority of the property is frequently completely underwater. Finally, our third site, next door in Pulaski County, is an equally inundated tract along the Cache River. This 31.4-acre easement is nestled beside the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge and the Horseshow Lake-Alexander State Fish & Wildlife Refuge.



41) Moving from one geographic extreme to the other, a 590.1-acre easement along the Wabash and Embarrass Rivers in Lawrence County borders Indiana on the east and the 2,180-acre Embarras River Bottoms State Habitat Area on the west. Part of the same ACEP-WRE program under which the three easements described above were protected, the property is part of a multidecade initiative begun in the first year of the century that's preserved wetland and forest along a solid nine mile stretch of the Embarras before it empties into the Wabash. The property itself is a mix of forested wetlands in the west and open fields in the east, cut through by an unnamed creek.*

* Yes, I realize that the polygons don't line up on the map. Unlike the case with all of the other sites mapped for these reports and in the online database, I don't have access to the underlying legal descriptions for the NRCS easements, so have to use the publicly available geospatial data. And yes, that *does* drive me to distraction.



42) Our final site of the year, both for the section [and for this entire report](#) is comprised of multiple parts that, coincidentally enough, link multiple existing NRCS easements. Once again on the Indiana border along the Wabash River, this time in Lawrence County, the 135.8-acre easement – protected, as with the rest of the NRCS easements discussed in this section through the ACEP-WRE program – has pockets of wooded wetlands that stand in contrast to agricultural fields cut through by a drainage channel flowing to the river. The project is one of a dozen such easements put in place over the past twenty years, and brings together what were four distinct units into a single cohesive tract of protected forest, wetland, and field.



Oneota Preserve (*Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation*)



Ferne Clyffe State Park (*Illinois Department of Natural Resources*)



Natural Areas Restoration and Management

For a year that began with the entire population of Illinois stuck at home, 2021 was witness to some notable achievements when it comes to actually caring for all the land I just spent forty pages discussing. As always, while there are dozens if not hundreds of worthy projects completed across the state, my focus here is on unusual or representative initiatives alongside the invaluable programs that make that work possible. I should think you're getting tired of my blathering by this point, so let's get to the good stuff.



West Fork Savanna (*Lake Forest Open Lands*)

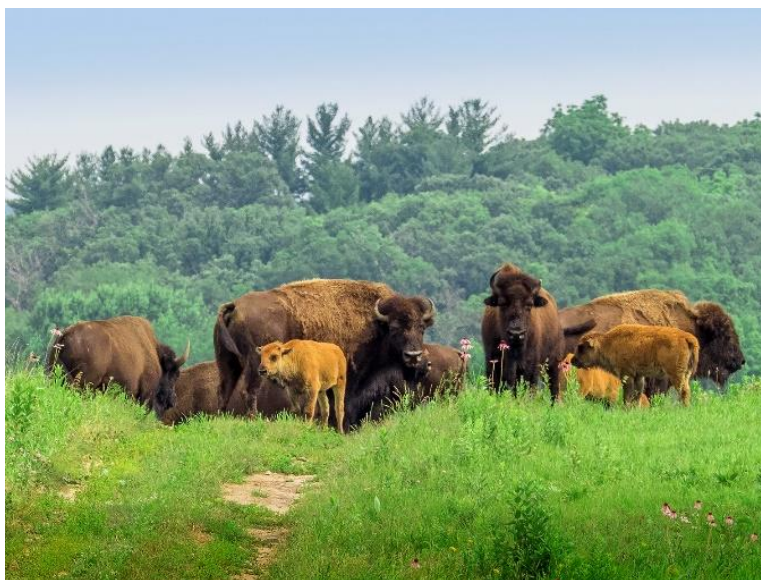


Salt Fork River (*Land Conservation Foundation*)

- ✿ Pop quiz. What's more important for restoring animal biodiversity – rebuilding the floral diversity of a site, or land management? And no, this isn't a trick question where the answer is me looking at you earnestly and solemnly intoning “both”. The answer, in what will be a disappointment to Kevin Costner fans the world over, is land management. As the authors of a [new study](#) from Northern Illinois University explain, “build it and they will come” is a great theory but, to their surprise, isn't borne out by, you know, facts.

[Studying](#) 17 plots measuring 60x60 meters with restoration ages ranging from 3 to 32 years, the study authors found that land management practices were a whopping 6x stronger than plant diversity in determining the biodiversity of snakes, small mammals, and ground dung beetles in a prairie environment (an important caveat noted by one of the authors is that the diversity of herbivores, which they didn't measure, may well be more closely tied to that of the available menu of delectable greens). What are the most valuable such practices? Bison-grazing and fire. The team at Nachusa have long been enthusiastic proponent of prescribed burning statewide; this new research demonstrates just how prescient they were.

As an aside, this is the second study in the last four years that I've written about in these pages that involved 1) Northern Illinois University conducting groundbreaking work that's groundbreaking in part because it manages the rare feat of being interesting *and* practical 2) The Nature Conservancy's Nachusa Grasslands being the premier site for prairie research in Illinois and 3) NIU collaborating with Nachusa to conduct said research. Both institutions are really frigging impressive, and both have my personal thanks for looking at questions that I likely never would've even thought to consider. They're pretty awesome, is all I'm saying.



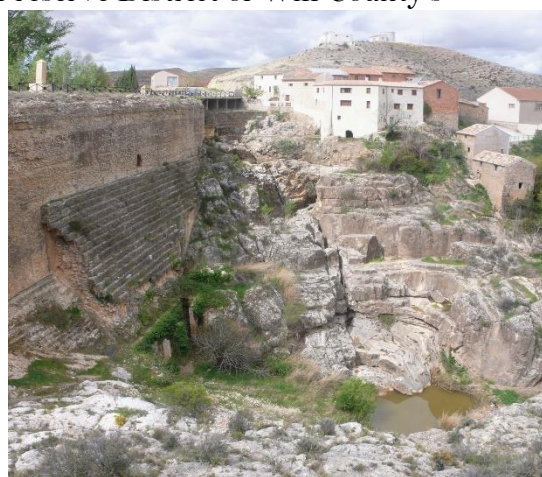
Nachusa Grasslands' most prominent residents engage in land management (*Charles Larry*)

- ✿ There are a bunch of grant initiatives that make the conservation work I talk (and talk, and talk, and *talk*) about in these pages possible, but longtime readers know that my personal favorite – and the competition isn't particularly close – is the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's** [Community Stewardship Challenge](#) program. Why? The answer's in the name. This isn't a one-and-done award. Instead, to gain the full financial benefits, grantees need to involve and earn the support of their *community*. As I've written previously, the Foundation provides grantees 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 site. 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 is required in order to adequately steward the preserve. Over the course of 2021, the Foundation awarded 11 of these challenge grants totaling \$322k, many for properties first discussed in past editions of this report.
- ✿ I've been promising the imminent arrival of the Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant Program in these pages for so long that it rivals Godot. Astute readers will note

that this year the update has moved from the Policy to the Natural Areas section of the document. And that's because [the wait is over](#); this is no longer policy, but on the ground action. Paid for through the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund, the program is designed to provide financial support to 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations for stewardship of natural areas protected within the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission system. That is to say, stewardship of the rarest and highest quality natural areas in the state that are protected and maintained by the private sector.

The program's impact was both immediate and profound, supporting equipment, prescribed burning, and invasive species control, among other projects. In just this first year, grants totaling \$456k were made to eight land trusts across the state, stewarding 26 distinct Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves. I struggle to conceive of a more efficient, let alone effective tool to not only maintain, but enhance the quality of these preeminent sites. It's an outstanding partnership between the public and private sectors, and, from my perspective, one of the highlights of 2021.

- ✿ I'm fascinated by large scale restoration. Most of the attention in this field goes to work on solid earth, but truth be told, there's little that has such an impact – both ecologically and visually – as the reinvigoration of our waterways. And one of the most dynamic tools available in that quest is dam removal. Don't get me wrong; dams have their place! Be it flood control, reservoir creation, or hydro power generation, there's a reason these things have been around for 5,000 years. For a whole lot of dams though, the benefits don't come particularly close to offsetting the costs, and that was unquestionably the case [for one such impoundment](#) at the Forest Preserve District of Will County's Hammel Woods preserve along the DuPage River in Shorewood. Constructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps to create a recreational pool, it was determined almost twenty years ago that the health of the river would be materially improved by its removal, with aquatic life then able to move upstream. And it's not just our region's watery denizens who benefit, as paddling along the river is materially easier (and I should think a tad bit more enjoyable) when you don't have to schlep your craft around a concrete and limestone wall.



Dams have been around for a long time...
(Angel Fandos – Wikimedia Commons)

- ✿ Protecting new land gets a lot of attention. Heck, I devote the bulk of this report to the subject. And if not protection, it's better than even money that the focus will be on restoration. Getting people out to actually appreciate – and dare I say *enjoy* these lands if oft overlooked. But not by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Since our last report, the [Public Amenities and Events](#) program has awarded ten grants of \$5,500 each to a mix of public and nonprofit organizations to build trails, install interpretive signage and picnic shelters, and in general open these natural refuges to the whole community.

- ✿ The **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** [tracked](#) 75,517 acres that were burned over the course of the 2020-2021 season (July 1 – June 30). Not only does that blow the previous season out of the water (to be expected, all things considered), but it's a record for the six years that this work has been systematically tracked. Over 40 public and nonprofit organizations manage the land with this invaluable tool, and are joined by an increasing number of private citizens from one end of the state to the other.



Prescribed fire in action (*Illinois Prescribed Fire Council*)

- ✿ Pollination is widely regarded as a good thing. But while the cross-pollination of ideas has never been easier thanks to the medium through which you received and are likely reading this, actual pollination in, you know, the real world has had a bit rougher go of things. What is this 'real' world I speak of? The Iceland Ministry of Tourism offers a [solid primer](#) to get everyone up to speed. OK, now that we're all on the same page, the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** has long recognized the challenge of sustaining the state's insect communities. The [K-12 Pollinator Schools Grant Program](#) brings pollinator habitat to the community through the installation of native flora – typically in areas ~1,000-2,500 sq. ft. – on and around schools. The complementary [Pollinator Meadows](#) program steps up the scale, providing support to local governments and nonprofits to convert turf grass to pollinator habitat. Over the course of 2021, seven grants totaling over \$100K were awarded across the two programs.
- ✿ There was something of a paucity of major projects or news last year; almost certainly a consequence in part of the pandemic; it's kinda hard to plan for 2021 when you're spending most of 2020 listening to songs from [REM](#) and the [Bee Gees](#) that've gone from catchy tune to statement of fact. So picture this. It's late June, and I'm seriously considering the possibility that this section will about as full as a swank downtown restaurant circa April 2020. And then the Illinois Audubon Society drops a bombshell that makes the [Tsar Bomba](#) look quaint by compare. Let me not further bury the lede; IAS was the recipient last year of a \$30 million [bequest](#). The trust that the grantors placed in the Society is testament to the organization's vision, its leadership, and its work across the state. Their legacy will be irrevocably entwined with each and every piece I will ever more write about the work of Illinois Audubon; lands protected and habitats restored, science conducted, field trips run and programs led. In short, it's a legacy worthy of their generosity.*

* Yep, those were references from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s all in one item.



Policy & Advocacy

There was a fair amount going on over the past year outside the world of conservation. I know, it's hard to believe, but it's true. That didn't stop some *really* good work from being accomplished. Like, work whose positive impact will be measured in decades, if not centuries. That's just what you should expect when it comes to policy, and is one of the principle reasons I save this section for the end each year.



Libertyville Village Hall (*David Holman*)

- ✿ Ever hear of the [National Wild and Scenic Rivers System](#)? It's run by the National Park Service supporting rivers that, among other things, are free flowing and of high water quality. No demerits if you're not familiar with this program, because Illinois is home to precisely one waterway in said system; part of the lower stretch of the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River, northwest of the City of Danville near the Indiana state line. The NPS helpfully points out that this represents $\sim 2/100^{\text{ths}}$ of 1% of the state's waterways. So take *that* Illinois prairie remnants. We finally have a number even *lower* than the "less than $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of 1%" line that's always (justifiably) pulled out whenever the subject comes up.

Why do I bring this up? Because happy fish and mussels aren't the only thing found along this unusual stretch of river; you'll also find coal ash! Lots and lots of coal ash. In big, coal ashy pits, the oldest dating back to the 1950s. Like, right on the [bank](#). Around a decade ago the Illinois EPA deemed this inadvisable, filing a complaint that sought to have the waste moved somewhere that wasn't a stone's throw from the pristine waterway. Last year the company that inherited the pits when it merged with the previous owner (a firm which, spoiler alert, will also be making an appearance in next year's report) reached an [agreement](#) with the Illinois Attorney General's office to drain these ecological-disasters-in-waiting and to dig a trench that'll collect contaminated groundwater. Remediation and restoration are fun to write about, but I think everyone can agree that preventing an ecopocalypse in the first place is the better move, so kudos to all involved in this, the year's most important water quality project.

✿ The changing nature of Illinois' electricity generating mix became a topic of discussion in last year's report for the first time, the centerpiece of which was – if I do say so myself – a sweet looking graph showing the steady reduction in the state's coal-fired generating capacity. I closed the piece by expressing my anticipation for additional declines resulting from the multiple announcements of future plant closings made public over the year. That's a trend that continued in 2021, as both of the two remaining coal plants in the Chicago suburbs announced they'll shut down this coming summer. Those retirements are a story for next year's report though. *This* year, we move from the invisible hand of the market steadily shifting the power mix to the very visible hand of government giving the whole process a helpful push.

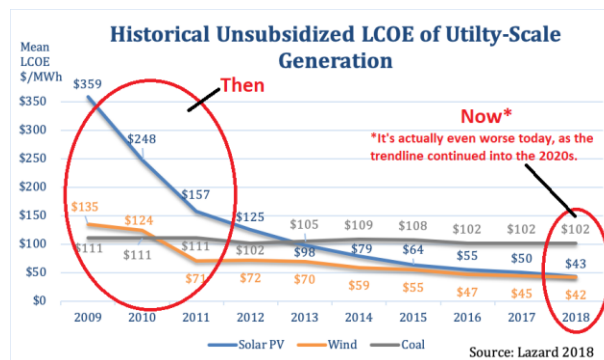
In the dog days of summer, the state legislature passed the [Energy Transition Act](#), which does a number of valuable things. First off, it bails out ComEd again because now that Michael Madigan is gone, who you gonna bribe to get that sweet, sweet public cash? (This is the part where I remind you that all opinions expressed in this report are my own and not representative of the positions of PSCC, and is the part where *you* recall who's writing this.) Second though, it sets 2045 as the closing date for the last of Illinois' coal-fired power plants, and requires some generating units at these facilities to be shuttered by 2038 unless they manage to cut the amount of CO₂ emissions by at least 45%. Let's examine why that's important and why, to paraphrase the Commander in Chief, it's a BFD.

Take a look at the chart below from the 2020 edition of this report tracking Illinois' coal-fired power capacity:



You're looking at the collective output of 19 facilities across the state. As of last year, only 11 were still operating, with many having already seen reductions in capacity. That was indicative of the larger trend, as well before this legislation had passed, *eight* had been scheduled for closing before the decade is out (that invisible hand again). Of the remainder, one is a doozy; a 1,600 MW behemoth that opened in the bygone era of...2012? Huh? A new coal-fired power plant was opened in Illinois in two thousand freaking twelve? How?

Well, it turns out the genesis is some sales folks who would've been right at home selling stock in a buggy whip factory by assuring potential buyers that that new Model-T horseless carriage thing was a fad. The project offered municipalities across the state the opportunity to lock in early 2010's coal-fired energy rates for 50 years. And since renewables will never be able to match the cost efficiency of sweet, sweet coal, what could possibly go wrong?



And what did they have to do to get this great deal? It was easy! Just take responsibility for paying off the \$5 *billion* in bonds issued to build this wonder of 19th...I mean 21st century technology. Genius.

So, that was kinda...ill-conceived. Residents of the communities that signed up to the deal were stuck paying increasingly more for energy than their neighbors, and were also on the hook for the bond payments. And from an environmental standpoint, coal plants in the country average a solid 50+ year lifespan, which is exactly what you want to hear when on current trends by the end of the century Chicago's going to be rocking like it's [central Texas](#). The new law will shutter the plant decades earlier than would otherwise have been the case, freeing customers from the higher energy rates. It'll also explore – no promises – ways to alleviate the crushing debt burden of repaying the bonds used to fund its construction.



Remnant oak groves and high quality wetlands in McHenry County (Brad Semel)



Dave Shakes His Fist in the Air

I've covered a lot of topics in this space over the years, with nuanced yet, I hope, humorous reviews of riparian land ownership, effective (and ineffective) long term planning, and public rights of way; exaltations of little known giants in the field and bemusing stories from those in the trenches. Yet you know what the most popular piece is by far? My exasperated rant on overused, devalued catchwords; you know, words like "unique". In recognition of the enduring popularity of that little aside, this year I'm expanding on the list of writing quirks and conventions that should be declared federal crimes. And what better way to lead off than with an updated version of the rant that started it all:

It's Critical

Four years. It's been four years since I waxed lyrical on my loathing of the word 'critical'. My hatred of this word burns with the passion of a thousand suns. It shows up with metronomic regularity in press releases and financial appeals from one end of the state to the other. And you know what? It's long since become meaningless. I'm sorry, but this word is as dead as Kevin Spacey's career. Stop using it. Please. Because I don't for a moment believe anything I read that claims this or that forest is critical for the survival of the flora or fauna-of-the-week (g'ah. I just wrote the hated word again myself. I feel dirty). What we have here is a once powerful descriptor whose meaning has been stripped through overuse. Or to put it more simply, when everything is critical, nothing is. I beg everyone reading this to at the very least break out the thesaurus next time you need to extol the virtues of a property or policy. Here, [I'll help](#).

Three Shall be the Number Thou Shalt Count

The number three is sacred in numerous religious traditions. To the Greeks, it was the number of the divine. And it's my personal linguistic nemesis. Where does the need to ascribe three to seemingly everything people do come from? You all know exactly what I'm talking about. This new program will achieve x, y, and z. Our organization strives to do a, b, and c. Please stop reaching to come up with a third item when lauding your subject matter, as it's embarrassingly obvious when a concept was tacked on, or the same idea expressed twice using different words to make the subject seem to have broader impact or import than it does. Relatedly, I cannot, I repeat, I *can not* be the only person to read these things and think to myself "OK, item number three, whatever it may be, is the one they don't care about all that much." And I suspect most of you – unconsciously at least – feel the same. Consider two hypothetical organizations. The first is focused on "Conservation, Restoration, and Education". The second describes its remit as "Education, Restoration, and Conservation." Pop quiz. Which one is more likely to have a strong K-8 program, and which to have the will and capacity to protect a prairie?

And the Number of the Counting Shall be Three

Sticking with the theme, constantly repeating the same word or phrase weakens the power of what you're trying to convey. Robert McKee [explains this brilliantly](#) (5:45-6:45), describing a "rule of thirds". The first time you say something, it'll have the desired effect. The second time, it'll have at best half the effect. The third time you do so, it'll descend to the realm of farce. Not

all that long ago I read a four minute piece that used the same term seven times (take a guess as to what word said term included). By the end, I'd stopped paying any attention to the subject matter, instead bemusedly skimming to find the next usage. Take another look at the land protection sections of this report. I actively endeavor to avoid using the same word multiple times in any one description (and I'll never use a word more than twice) – hence why 'parcel' becomes 'property', 'unit', 'land', and 'preserve'. There's a reason I spend such an inordinate amount of time revising this text each year, and it is most assuredly not for my health.

Typographical Crimes Against Humanity

For decades, a titanic struggle has been waged from keyboards across the planet. The battle was joined over what may be the most fundamentally important question of the age. Shall there be one space or two after a period? How this is a question is beyond my comprehension, as the answer is self-evident. There should be but a single space. Two spaces, to borrow a marvelous turn of phrase I was acquainted with last year, is offensive to my eyes. Now if you learned to type on a typewriter, which for a long time were monospaced, you're forgiven for using two spaces; indeed, that was the proper way to do things. For everyone else, there's no excuse. I will fight you on this. And if we must indeed cross digital swords, I will have a powerful ally, for Microsoft Word has [entered the field of battle](#).

And One (1) More Thing

People do a lot of stupid things to try and make legal or quasi-legal documents look Important or Very Professional. The absolute worst, bar none, is writing out a number and then appending to that the digit in question in parentheses. You've probably all seen this sort of thing; "Submit two (2) copies of the plan".

Why (why) you may ask do people (people) do this (this)? Because it sure as heck doesn't imbue the document with greater weight. Back in the day, when legal documents were written by hand, there was some sense in the approach, as it prevented someone from surreptitiously adding another digit. That is not the case now, and hasn't been since vellum went out of style.

The argument has been made that it precludes the possibility of making an error. To which I respond "bovine manure." The only, and I mean the only time you'll see this is when someone (someone) is using a number (number) less than about ten. When was the last time you read a contract or proposal that said something like "the shoreline is four thousand nine hundred and thirty-five (4,935) feet"? Never, that's when. And yet a writer is a whole lot more likely to screw up writing "4,935" than they are writing, you know, "1". Why isn't the larger number spelled out? Because it looks ridiculous, and also takes a good deal of time to write. That's why we use frigging digits.

Every single major [style guide](#) on this is consistent. Spell out any number between zero and ten, or a number that's used to start a sentence. Use Arabic numerals for everything else. Engineering and scientific writing, as a rule, can use numerals – and only numerals – for anything over ten. I'm not making a value judgement, but I guarantee Stephen Hawking's [seminal work](#) describing the process by which black holes emit radiation and so eventually vanish is more technically complex and thus subject to a mistyped digit than is your request for proposals or conservation easement agreement. So, for the sake (sake) of us all, let's agree (agree) to end this pretentious, pointless practice (practice)!



2020 Revisited

Every year I send this report out thinking that maybe, just maybe, I found and covered every land protection project in the state, from the smallest pinprick of a property to the largest of refuges. And every year that belief – nay, that hope – is cruelly crushed. 2020 was no different but, I think we can all agree, there's little more satisfying than learning of projects that you never knew existed. Before we jump into the big ones though, I'd like to start by offering a public service announcement. The Illinois Audubon Society's 38.4-acre Adams Wildlife Sanctuary in Springfield is now 38.5 acres with the addition of a small lot off of its southwestern corner that was previously the site of a house. Also, the McHenry County Conservation District's 515.5 acre North Branch Preserve is now an even 516 acres thanks to the addition of a half-acre lot in the middle of a wetland, both of which closed in 2020. Right! And with that we're off to the show.

✿ Forest Preserve District of Cook County

Though the District closed on several properties in 2020, some *stuff* y'all might remember happened that year that slowed down the paperwork a wee bit. So round about early spring, both the world and I were privileged to news of additions to two preserves. In the far south, on the border with neighboring Will County, a 5.6-acre wooded homesite was added to the 1042.3-acre Plum Creek Preserve. As a bonus, the land is across a street from a large preserve owned by the Forest Preserve District of Will County that itself saw a major addition around the same time as its northern neighbor.



While this was going on, wheels were also turning in central Cook. An unnamed 110.2 acre preserve northeast of Cermak Woods and near the Villages of Riverside and Lyons along a sharp bend in the Des Plaines River grew by 5.8 acres with the addition of numerous small lots scattered across a residential subdivision that – owing to the fact that it was built along the aforementioned sharp bend in said Des Plaines River – had an unfortunate tendency to flood rather frequently. This led the Cook County Land Bank Authority and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago to buy out the former residents and demolish the structures, with the land subsequently transferred to the District.

✿ Middle Rock Conservation Partners

Middle Rock Conservation Partners burst onto the scene in 2019 with the creation of their inaugural preserve, in Lee County. Unbeknownst to me, they followed this up the next year with the new South Hahnman Prairie preserve in Whiteside County. Buffering the Hahnman Sand Prairie Nature Preserve, the two units of the 25.1 acre preserve both buffer and are linked by the privately owned Hahnman Sand Prairie Nature Preserve. The Nature Preserve is a small part of an expansive, privately owned prairie ecosystem that is home to sensitive amphibians, reptiles, insects, and birds including the Northern harrier and Short-eared owl.



A sliver of the eastern parcel is native prairie, with the balance historically used for agriculture. The western unit had a similar history, with another portion in grassland. So, you can't see it on the photo, on account of it being over a year old, but the *entire* site has since been planted to prairie. Both units were overseeded with 90+ species of native plants. It gets better. The land separating the two properties is owned by the local electrical company, which worked with MRCP to plant ~4 acres of their own property to prairie using the same seed mix, thus completely buffering the Nature Preserve. How'd all this happen? Well, the whole project is part of a larger whole; a new wind farm was built immediately to the south, along with a switching station between the preserve (that's the industrial-looking rectangle on the map). Once the station's footprint had been settled on, the owners, working with the Illinois DNR's Incidental Take Authorization program, had the freedom to donate the adjacent property that is now the state's newest prairie restoration...and to join in the restoration fun themselves. Good times, and a good way to close out this report for another year.

✿ United States Dept. of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS closed on five new easements in 2020, all in southern Illinois, the most recent in July. Moving with speed and alacrity that would put the most [lethargic sloth](#) to shame, the powers that be then got around to making news of the projects public in the late fall...of 2021. All five are part of the Wetland Reserve Program, and four are permanent, with the fifth, an 82.7-acre site in Jasper County – protected for a period of 30 years. The other four easements are in Alexander County (297.3 acres), Crawford (216.3 acres), Gallatin (200.4 acres) and Pope (125.5 acres). None are near existing protected properties *except* that in Pope County, which is adjacent to the southern unit of the Golconda Marina State Recreation Area. So, if you work for the IDNR, take note. If you don't, well, it's still good info, but you're about 18,000 words into this report, so there's no shame in zoning out a bit.





Changes at the Top

There are some who are legends in their own time, and some who are legends in their own mind. **Fran Harty**, who retired this past year from **The Nature Conservancy**, is without question the former. Visionary. Innovator. Mentor. Leader. Fran's impact on conservation in Illinois is to the best of my knowledge without peer. While with the Illinois DNR, he led the successful push to create the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie south of Chicago. He's a leading figure with and trusted advisor to the nonprofit Land Conservation Foundation. Working with the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, he was one of the leading voices in the drafting and passage of the Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Act – providing state funding for the private restoration and management of land dedicated and registered with the Illinois Nature Preserves system. And that's just off the top of my head. Fran's knowledge, expertise, generosity, and sheer creativity are without equal, and I'll be forever grateful for both his service and friendship!

Melissa Kinast has assumed the Executive Director role with the **Barrington Area Conservation Trust**, taking over from the incomparable Susan Lenz, who played a *major* role in growing the organization into the pillar of the community that it is today. Ms. Kinast came to the Trust with a history in both the real estate and not-for-profit space which, I think you'll agree, is a solid combination for a land trust.

Lorrie Pearson took charge of the growing **Champaign County Forest Preserve District** this past year, as the reins were passed from Mary Ellen Wuellner – who led the agency through a notable growth spurt. Ms. Pearson comes to the role with a surfeit of experience and deep ties to the County, most recently serving as the Director of Community Development Services in the City of Urbana.

Wayne Schennum is a man whom I never met, and yet one whose name is as recognizable to me as that of my oldest friends. The Illinois Natural Areas Inventory. The Advanced Identification Wetland Inventory of northeastern Illinois. The McHenry County Natural Areas Inventory (upon which The Land Conservancy of McHenry County's unparalleled land protection work is based). Wayne was a central figure in the creation of each, and many more projects besides. Passing away unexpectedly last year, he did so in the midst of the work he loved; on a preserve, surveying the flora whose protection was made possible because of the foundation that he laid. His work is equally central to my own endeavors, and he'll be remembered each and every time I draw upon the priceless resources that he played such a major role in creating.

You reached the end! I know, it was just 50 pages this year; I'm surprised too. 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.