



2020 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, nonprofit association that works to strengthen the effectiveness of conservation land trusts in Illinois. Conservation land trusts, such as local land conservancies, are also nonprofit organizations seeking to improve the quality of life in their communities. Collectively, these organizations have helped protect more than 200,000 acres of open space in Illinois.

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

Find out more at prairiestateconservation.org.

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

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2020 – Year in Review

So, um...how was your year? Anything interesting happen? Yeah, me neither. Our lives may have been totally uneventful and completely free of stress of any kind, but while we were all bemoaning the lack of excitement and the utter banality of the year, a heck of a lot was happening in the world of Illinois conservation, every iota of which I aim to document herein.

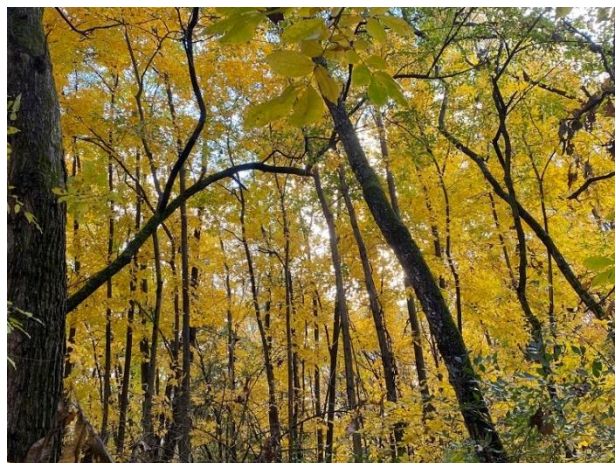
This report is again being supported by the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, whom I've had the pleasure of working with on a variety of projects over the last several years. Check out the previous page if you're not familiar with what they do. In short, the work of the Coalition and its members are the reason this report exists. Seriously. They're collectively so efficacious that its first edition exclusively featured their work...and that was well before they were sponsoring it! Oh, and remember, all opinions, commentary, and asides in this compendium are mine alone, and don't necessarily reflect those of either PSCC or its members.

With that, I bid you welcome to *2020 in Review!* Kick back and dive in... ..because let's be honest, it's not like you've got many places you can go today, right? This year, we're looking at:

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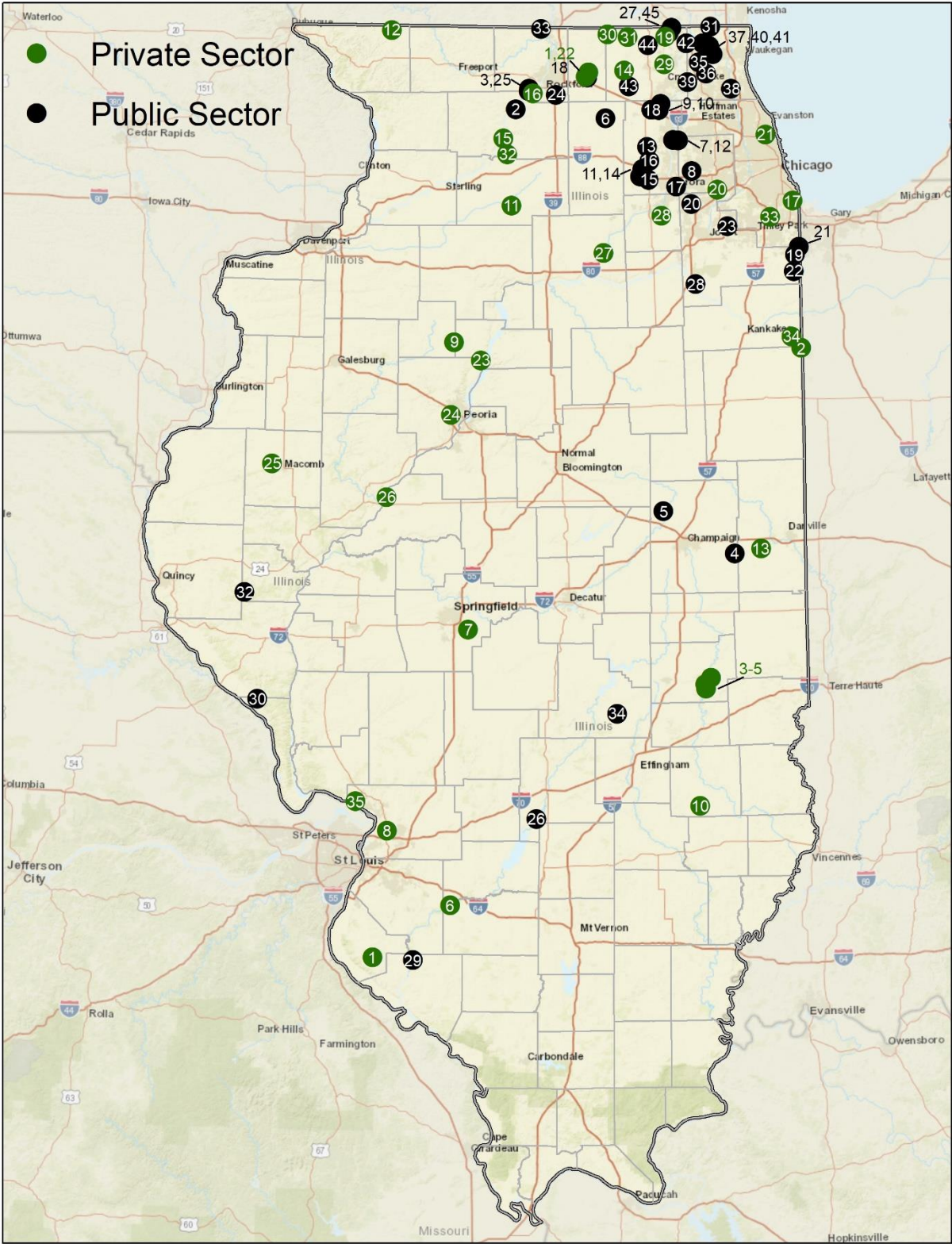
Jordan Creek (*Melissa Records*)



Crowley Oaks

(*Kim Elsenbroek – The Land Conservancy of McHenry*)

2020 Land Protection Projects

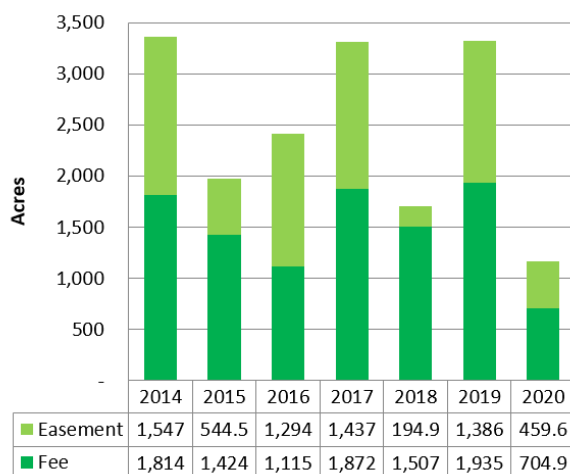




Private Sector Land Conservation

Over what was by any definition an eventful year, Illinois' conservation land trusts met a multitude of challenges, permanently preserving 1,164.5 acres across the state. Unexpectedly, at least from my perspective, although the acreage protected declined markedly when set against past years, the total number of projects barely budged, with a continued focus on expanding existing preserves and protecting new high-quality sites. And now for David's Annual Pedantic Reminder: You see that graph off to the right? 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 the project itself is most assuredly still covered in this voluminous review. Enjoy that bit of minutiae, but want more? You're in luck. Because new this year, there's *more* nuance.



Historically, if a nonprofit land trust acquired, say, an easement over a property, and then the same property was immediately or shortly thereafter sold to a government for conservation purposes, the 'credit' went to the land trust. For example, if a property was placed under a conservation easement (which reduces the market value of the land), and then sold for that reduced market value to a conservation buyer, the holder of the easement got credit for the whole project. I decided that was pretty arbitrary on my part, because such transactions are *always* part of a single project – that is to say, you wouldn't have one without the other. So, new rule! If there's a public-private partnership wherein the property changes hands twice within the year, or one party holds an easement over the land and the other one acquires the property, each party gets credit for half of the project's total acreage. I've adjusted the numbers for past years to keep everything consistent. Enough with the boring explanations. On to the show!



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

✿ Clifftop

1) The Illinois Natural Areas Inventory is an unusually thorough, comprehensive compendium of the highest quality natural areas in the state, originally compiled in the mid-1970s. And when the Powers That Be say “highest quality”, they mean it – only land that’s part of the Inventory can qualify for dedication as an Illinois Nature Preserve. And that’s exactly the path followed by an 83.8-acre preserve (84.8 gross acres) in southern Monroe County that Clifftop acquired last year with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. The previous landowner dedicated 64.8 acres as a Nature Preserve in 2002, protecting a high-quality upland forest, sandstone canyons and two stunning waterfalls.



That former landowner intended to add another 20 acres to the preserve upon the expiration of two Conservation Reserve Program contracts; land that he sought to convert from agricultural fields to forest – creating a larger, seamless woodland. While he passed away in 2019, in his will he asked that those properties be added to the Nature Preserve. Working with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and Clifftop, his son fulfilled his father’s wish, dedicating the land last year. Clifftop then acquired the entire property, and will continue to restore the land and, through their dedicated stewardship, build upon the legacy of its protector.

✿ Friends of the Kankakee

2) Impartiality is a fine virtue, but when it comes to land protection, it’s one I lack, because Friends’ systematic building of the Kankakee National Wildlife and Fish Refuge is just so *fun* to watch. I know, I know, I’m supposed to use words like “inspiring” or “exhilarating”, and it’s unquestionably those too, but darn it all, it is a whole lot of fun.



Through the beginning of last year, they had preserved 315.1 acres (quick programming note. Improved parcel boundaries released last year enabled me to refine the acreage number, leading to the 0.2 acre increase over what, in last year’s report, I reported as 314.94 preserved acres), all of which will be deeded to the USFWS when circumstances permit. They’ve spent over 20 years piecing together the preserve, almost entirely through the purchase of individual lots $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre in size. That includes the 66.1-acre National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, gifted to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2016. Over the course of 2020, more than a dozen separate transactions covering over thirty parcels, all supported by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** grew the future Refuge by 23.7 acres, further solidifying the link between the federal property and state preserves to both east and west.

✿ Grand Prairie Friends

3) I've extolled the awesomeness of the Warbler Ridge Conservation Area a [few](#) times [over](#) the [last](#) several [years](#) as Grand Prairie Friends has, in under a decade, methodically assembled and restored what was as of the beginning of the year a 1,004.3 acre preserve linking two large publicly owned preserves to the north and south to create a single macrosite of well over 3,500 acres. The very first piece of the conservation area was acquired back in the bucolic days of 2012, and became the entryway for the entire preserve, hosting the site's main parking lot and trailhead center at the terminus of a dead-end street. And therein was a conundrum! For all visitors to this fine natural retreat had to both enter and exit across the middle of the 3-acre property of a generous neighbor. While certainly workable, it was hardly ideal, doubly so because it also made posting directional signage *challenging* to say the least. Last year that challenge came to an end when the Friends purchased said 3-acre parcel – from the same individual, by the by, who sold that first property to GPF almost a decade ago. An exceptional person all around. Forest transitions to ravines on either side of the roadway as it welcomes visitors to this exceptional preserve.



4) It'll come as no surprise to most of my readers that we're staying with the Warbler Ridge Conservation Area for a second project. As I mentioned above, the site links two publicly owned preserves to its north and south. And it's to the north that we now turn. The City of Charleston's 747.2-acre Woodyard Conservation Area and Lake Charleston already had a tenuous link to Warbler Ridge across the Embarras River. A 13.5-acre wooded addition acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and the *Lumpkin Family Foundation* solidifies this by creating an opportunity for a pedestrian connection between the two sites. GPF and the City have already partnered and are working towards the construction of a bridge spanning both the river and adjacent highway to create a seamless experience for visitors to the two preserves.

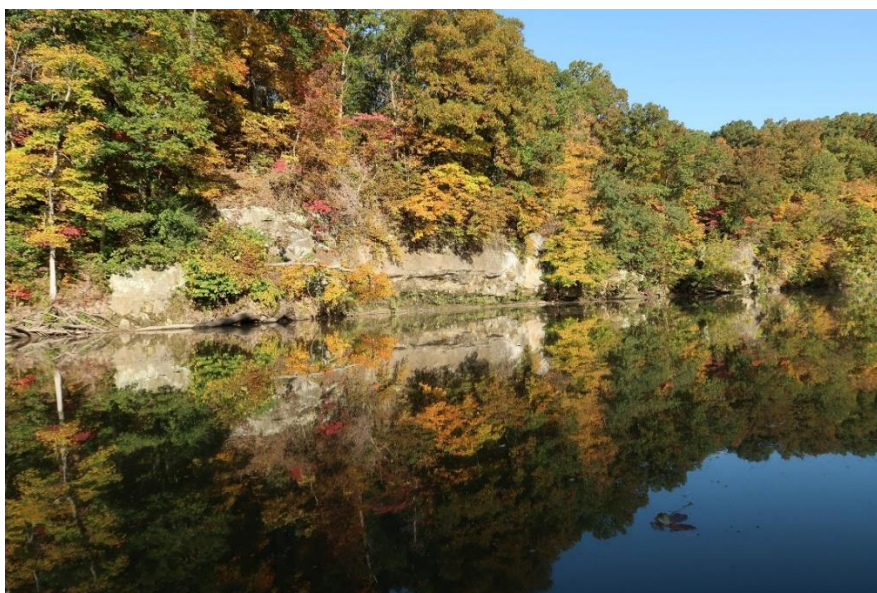


As an added bonus, the new property contains a 5-bay garage and large open meeting space with attached offices. Which means...Grand Prairie Friends now has a permanent office! I can think of no better home for the organization than its most iconic preserve.



New GPF Office
(Grand Prairie Friends)

5) Prepare for a change in perspective, because we're headed north yet again. Past Lake Charleston even. The newest addition to Grand Prairie Friend's Warbler Ridge complex establishes a foothold a bit over two-and-a-half miles upstream along the Embarras River as the crow flies from the Friends' new office. This 42.3-acre wooded bluff acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** has steep topography throughout. The rolling forest will be part of the Brookfield Energy Bat Mitigation project – restoring and managing the land as habitat for Little Brown bats and the teeny, tiny, weighs about as much as a quarter Tri-Colored bat. The project is the latest in a longstanding push by GPF to both restore and create bat habitat across the growing natural refuge.



Topography! In Illinois! (*Grand Prairie Friends*)

✿ Heartlands Conservancy

6) The Kaskaskia River is one of the defining geographic features of southwestern Illinois, and long a focus of Heartlands' work. Last year, the Conservancy acquired 18.1 acres at a bend along the River as an addition to the ~155-acre Kathleen Scanlan Conservation Area (the preserve is around 160 acres if one includes the bed of the adjacent river) in northwestern Washington County. Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the property is entirely covered by a bottomland forest and is the first publicly accessible natural area in the Kaskaskia bottomlands. If you're feeling a distinct sense of déjà vu reading this, there's a good reason; Heartlands completed another addition to this same site last year, and acquired the



original preserve in 2018. Yeah, it's growing quickly! As I've written previously, the preserve is in an ecologically rich area, as demonstrated by the three registered Land & Water Reserves all found within a mile of the site.

7) Continuing with the theme of riverine protection, Heartlands last year accepted a 122.63-acre easement southeast of the City of Springfield along the east bank of the South Fork of the Sangamon River in the County of the same name. The propert... .. wait a sec. Springfield? Sangamon River? That's not southwest Illinois.



You'd be justified wondering if I mistakenly put this project in the wrong section. Nay, I did not. Over the several years I've been writing this annual chronicle, readers have been treated to a number of easements that the Conservancy has taken on over wetland mitigation banks, working to ensure the permanent protection of these carefully designed and constructed restorations. This new project was built by one of Heartlands long-term partners, making it the ideal holder of the easement rights. The land itself – adjacent to over 450 acres of conservation easements in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program – is a mosaic of wetlands (of course), agricultural fields and forests, all draining to the river as it flows north.

8) In the 2018 edition of this annual compendium – halcyon days when I managed to keep it under 50 pages, believe it or not – I discussed an acquisition project that grabbed both my attention and interest that was completed by The Nature Conservancy with the support of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation. As I wrote at the time, these 9.6 acres of ephemeral wetlands and sand prairie would eventually be deeded to Heartlands Conservancy. That transfer was completed last year, with Heartlands now managing the site for the protection of the state threatened [Illinois Chorus Frog](#), a goal shared by the IDNR's adjacent 43.3-acre Sand Road Mitigation Area. As I wrote two years ago explaining why I was so drawn to the project “*The chorus*



frog lives only in sand prairie/wetlands, an unusual ecosystem which thus severely limits its population while also making it exceedingly vulnerable to habitat destruction. The threat is such that the original Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, a document not known for articulating hard, quantifiable 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.” This exciting acquisition makes real progress in reaching that goal.”

✿ Illinois Audubon Society

9) A 161.6-acre farm on the eastern border of Stark County was donated to the Society, having been in the grantor's family since 1939. This is a remarkable project in the truest sense of that word, and twice over. Strong words, right? And for a *farm*, in a report whose *raison d'être* is natural areas no less? And yet yeah, yeah it *is* remarkable. First off, Illinois' land trust community owns over 55,500 acres of natural lands, a number that, as this year's report amply demonstrates, continues to grow. Restoring, not to mention maintaining this land is a challenge. As one of my mentors in this field (Hi Steve!) is fond of saying "forever is a long time." The donors and IAS both recognize this, and so under the donation agreement, income from the farm – whose fecund soils routinely yield plentiful harvests – will be put toward stewardship activities on the Society's many preserves around the state. Seeing the potential of the farm as a sustainable source of funding and making that a reality was inspired.



Second, readers of 2019's annual rundown will recall that IAS was last year the recipient of two dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves, donated after the landowners spent 20+ years acquiring and restoring the property. Well guess what? This farm was donated by the same incredibly generous couple. I wrote last year that the donor's "work and dedication are surpassed by no one." Those words are even truer today. As I said, a remarkable project.

10) Let's be honest. Acquiring property is usually a pretty staid affair. Oh, the negotiations may be worthy of epic song, but the denouement is two parties in a room signing papers and pretending they understand legal descriptions and title commitments... .. That didn't happen with a new 39.2-acre property IAS acquired in southern Jasper County in the Prairie Ridge-Jasper County Natural Area Inventory site. Instead, this fine property was acquired at auction, and not one of those boring sealed bid auctions either. Nope. At a live (socially distanced, internet-enabled) auction. And IAS won.



So why is that exciting? OK, first off, do you not understand the exhilaration and nerve-wracking anticipation of a land auction? Then I can't help you. But also, second, because IAS has spent decades working with the Illinois DNR, assembling the 2,666.1-acre Prairie Ridge-Jasper State Natural Area and owning two properties adjoining the preserve that add another 80.2 acres.

All of this in service of... the [prairie chicken](#)! By 1959, both 48-starred [American flags](#) and the chicken were nearing extinction in Illinois. That began to (*slowly*) change with the acquisition of the first parcels that would become the Jasper and Marion County Prairie Ridge preserves; a 60+ year project that this new parcel expands. The geography of the site is such that the Society and DNR believe that the property will

quickly attract the birds once restoration gets underway. And that, as this mid-2010s [opinion piece](#) that I love reading once a year or so eloquently explains, is worth celebrating.

11) Amboy Marsh, southeast of the city of the same name, is one of the highlights of the Lee County natural scene. The dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve is a mix of sedge meadow, black oak savanna, and dry sand prairie. A 19.5-acre addition (19.8 gross acres) to the 293.1-acre preserve is similarly diverse, featuring wetland, sand dune, a restorable oak



Once and future oak savanna (Deb Carey - IAS)

savanna, and an agricultural field.

The final piece of what was once a several hundred-acre family farm, the executor of the estate owning the property sought to preserve the land forever in its natural condition as a memorial to the family. With the help and dedication of IAS, that goal has been made a reality, and the property – which provides breeding habitat for *three* Endangered or Threatened species will be fully restored to its native condition, honoring the past as it's preserved for the future.



✿ Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

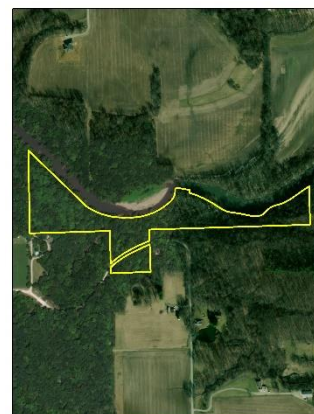
12) The dedication of private landowners to the care and restoration of their land is a theme across much of JDCF's work, nowhere – and I mean nowhere – more so than at the new Rutherford Refuge at Twin Bridges preserve. Purchased as a gift by Mr. Rutherford for his wife in 1989, the couple spent nearly three decades caring for this rare remnant natural area, creating a refuge for nature and family alike. The 24-acre site in northeastern Jo Daviess County, acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** is home to a panoply of habitats including native wet-mesic prairie, sedge meadow, seep, oak barrens, and a stream – the aptly named Clear Creek which has been identified as one of the cleanest waterways in the County. This diverse assemblage supports at least half a dozen unusual species of flora and fauna, including two rare insect species.



Though both Mrs. and Mr. Rutherford have since passed, their legacy will live on not only in the preservation of their refuge (and in the work of JDCF itself, of which they were founding members), but in its care. Their children have generously established an endowment from a portion of their parents' estate that will provide funding for the Foundation's perpetual stewardship, management, and maintenance of the preserve.

✿ Land Conservation Foundation

13) LCF wasted no time last year, closing in January on 10.75 acres (11.0 gross acres) at the confluence of Jordan Creek and the Salt Fork River (a tributary of the Vermilion River) in central Vermilion County, acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*. So far so normal, right? Well, first off, stop being so cynical; that's my shtick. How many other sites described in this report lie at the intersection of two waterways? None, that's how many. Still, maybe the creek and river are uninspiring biological mediocrities. Wrong! *Both* are part of the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, a fact that's led to the established of a Land and Water Reserve *and* a forest research site owned by the University of Illinois, both less than two miles upstream. That makes this, LCF first project in Vermilion County, a worthy addition to its protected properties. Thought I was done, didn't ya? The Foundation could have justifiably rested on its proverbial laurels, but that's not their style, and so they followed up the creation of this new preserve several months later with a 3.5-acre addition on its eastern side along the southern bank of the Salt Fork River, resulting in a final preserve of 14.2 acres.



Jordan Creek (Melissa Records)

✿ McHenry County Conservation Foundation

14) In straightened economic times, public-oriented generosity is all the more precious. Last year, a farsighted and equally generous private individual donated the funds to cover the acquisition of a 14.7-acre property surrounded by the McHenry County Conservation District's 793.1-acre Marengo Ridge Conservation Area. A glacial ridge on the property is covered in rolling oak woodland including white, red, bur, and hill's oaks. An oak forest inholding is a worthwhile addition to any preserve, but the land is *also* home to a small woodland vernal pool and open wet meadow, the former providing breeding habitat for amphibians and invertebrates that are often hurting for such locales. The property will eventually be deeded to the Conservation District – MCCF's longstanding partner – formally becoming part of one of the District's most popular preserves.



✿ Natural Land Institute

15) The Natural Land Institute is one of Illinois' oldest conservation land trusts, formed in 1958 (and detailed in the excellent book *Force of Nature*, a biography of the guy, George Fell, who in addition to founding NLI reorganized The Nature Conservancy to the form we know it today and in his spare time created the Illinois Nature Preserves system) and today protecting natural communities across the state. To everything there's a beginning though, and for NLI that beginning was Devil's Backbone. South of the City of Oregon in Ogle County and about a mile east/northeast of the Lowden-Miller State Forest and Castle Rock State Park, the heavily wooded 39.6-acre site was the first acquired and permanently held by the land trust as a nature preserve. An equally wooded 17.5-acre addition (18.15 gross acres) provides depth to the preserve, precluding the possibility that future development would lead to a fragmented, less ecologically secure habitat.



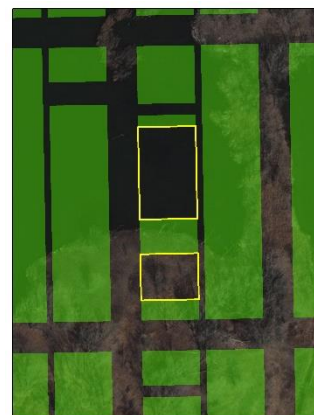
16) The central border region between Winnebago and Ogle Counties at the intersection of the Rock and Kishwaukee rivers is home to an array of well-known natural areas including the Howard Coleman Dells Nature Preserve; exactly what you'd expect at the confluence of two of the state's major river systems. Often overlooked next to their larger brethren are NLI's Lind Preserve and McGeachie Tract, totaling 11.8 acres between them. They're never going to be overlooked again though after being connected by a 42.3-acre acquisition last year to create the new Lind-McGeachie Woods Preserve. Purchased with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, dry-mesic forest on all three properties contain mature oak and hickory trees that NLI will actively manage by removing invasives and thinning the canopy. That's not all the new site has to offer though; a retired agricultural field transitions to a floodplain forest adjacent to the nearby Silver Creek in the far south of the new site, all of which will be further restored. In other words, all those other preserves are going to have some new competition when it comes to quality and species richness!



McGeachie Lind Preserve (NLI)

✿ Openlands

17) Openlands has done peerless work building the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. Piecing together the Liberty Prairie Reserve. Assembling a network of protected lands up and down the Kishwaukee River... And their first project of 2020 had nothing whatsoever to do with any of these. Lest you forget, the organization has *also* spent decades serving the residents of the City of Chicago through more programs and projects than even I can count. That includes protecting Chicago's hidden yet very real ecological treasures, of which Indian Ridge Marsh is the premier example. Located in the southeast corner of the City less than two miles from the Indiana state line, the 102.7-acre native marsh and wet prairie owned by the Chicago Park District has slowly grown lot-by-lot to encompass nearly the entire site. A 0.86-acre property acquired last year which will eventually be deeded to the District was the largest portion of the marsh and prairie complex still in private hands. And remember, as the Park District's ownership expands, they also gain the ability to vacate the dozens of unused alley and roadway rights-of-way that bisect the area, potentially expanding it further still.



18) Admit it. Every time you open one of these annual chronicles you start out wondering, even if just in the back of your mind, which projects featured the most substantial [tracts of land](#). I'm pleased to announce that your wait for the private sector winner this year is over, by virtue of a new 335.311-acre conservation easement in central Boone County along Piskasaw Creek immediately east of the City of Belvidere.



The result of a longstanding partnership between Openlands and the Boone County Conservation District (BCCD) to protect habitat along the Kishwaukee River and Piskasaw Creek, the project was made possible by a grant from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** to the BCCD. Combined with a generous donation from the landowner this enabled the District to acquire the expansive site. In simultaneous transactions, Openlands purchased the property from the landowner and sold it to the District while retaining a conservation easement that governs the terms of its restoration of and protects the habitat in perpetuity.

The property is divided by a road into two units. The northern section is almost entirely sedge meadow (really, *really* wet sedge meadow. As I can and will personally and vehemently attest to), with some small upland areas that are used as horse pasture. To the east, across the creek are small wooded wetlands. The southern unit slopes gently from west to east. The uplands are used for agriculture, while areas closer to the creek have recently been removed from production and will be restored to a mixed prairie and wetland/sedge meadow complex in the coming years. Forest and wet forest again dominate the smaller portions of the site lying east of the waterway.

That waterway merits a wee bit of attention. Piscascaw Creek is a high quality, meandering stream that I can confirm from personal experience is *incredibly* clear and clean. I am not exaggerating; longtime readers know how much I loathe hyperbole. I had occasion to visit an upstream portion of the stream about six years ago, and stopped slack-jawed once I'd bushwhacked my way to the creek. You don't need to and shouldn't take my word for it though; the Professional Smart People™ agree with me! The Creek and its tributary are not only the healthiest waterways in Boone County, the Piscasaw is one of the healthiest in the state, with the portion flowing through and past much of the northern unit given a Class A integrity rating (the integrity rating measures "how closely a test community resembles a natural, least-disturbed, or intact community") in the Illinois DNR's statewide database of Biologically Significant Streams (BSS); a designation afforded fewer than 70 waterways in the whole of the state.

19) For any of my readers jonesing for their annual Hackmatack fix, it's all good; you're covered. Following up on an insane 2019, Openlands continued their work in the eastern section of the National Wildlife Refuge found in northern McHenry County and southern Wisconsin by acquiring a 46.6-acre agricultural field bordering the Village of Richmond. Across the street from a 188.2-acre property discussed in last year's report and a just a bit north of the McHenry County Conservation District's (MCCD) Glacial Park Conservation Area, the property is the next link in a planned corridor linking the MCCD's Glacial Park and North Branch preserves.



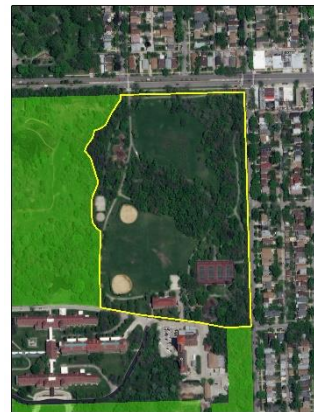
As with the Hackmatack properties the organization purchased last year, the new land was acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. Working with the Hackmatack Conservation Partnership – an umbrella group of public and private conservation organizations that identify priority lands for protection – Openlands purchases these properties as they come onto the market and eventually sells or gifts them to a third party such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service or the Conservation District, using any proceeds to fund new protection projects within and around the Refuge.

20) Fee acquisitions are fun, but who doesn't like to mix things up with a conservation easement every now and then? Not Openlands, which protected 11.052 acres in southern DuPage County, adjacent to the Villages of Woodridge and Darien in their second conservation easement of the year. Surrounded by residential development, the easement property, with a residential house and garage in the middle, is home to a mature tree canopy, and has been wooded at least as far back as the late 1930s, which is saying something for northeastern Illinois. Black cherry, Elm, and Black walnut are common throughout much of the site, with smaller numbers of oaks and hickories owing to a filling in of



the understory over time. That history has hardly been forgotten though, as the landowner will be restoring the entire property to a mix of dry and mesic woodland, mesic savanna, a small prairie in the east, and a sedge meadow and wetlands in the southwest.

21) Two easements may be good, but three are unquestionably better, as is demonstrated by a 22.57-acre addition to the 81.747-acre North Park Village easement in the heart of Chicago's North Park neighborhood, in northern Cook County. Pehr Peterson Park offers a fairly wide variety of outdoor recreational activities, including baseball/softball, tennis, basketball, hiking, and playgrounds for children. Interspersed among woodlands and an open field, the site complements a nature preserve, nature study area, rock garden, and community garden plots, all of which are part of the original easement, which was restated to include the Park. But that's not all the restatement did. The original easement was term-limited; signed in 1989, it was set to expire in 2064. The restated, enlarged easement is now perpetual. And *that* is a fine legacy for all involved.



✿ Parks & Conservation Foundation

22) Remember that 335+ acre easement/fee acquisition partnership between Openlands and the Boone County Conservation District I discussed about a page and a half ago? Its impetus was the decision by a conservation-minded family with a successful agricultural concern to close up some operations and simultaneously seek to preserve for posterity as much of the natural land owned by the business as was feasible. That sense of civic and environmental stewardship led to a generous donation of 5.5 acres to the Parks & Conservation Foundation a quarter mile to the west of that other project, at a bend in the Kishwaukee River on the east side of the City of Belvidere. Small though the property is, the riparian meanderings provide fantastic habitat for turtles, which make good use of the adjacent wetland.



Kishwaukee River in Belvidere (*Google Street View*)

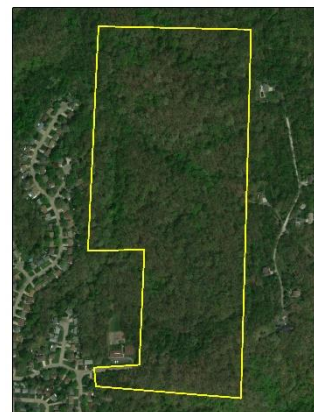
✿ Prairie Land Conservancy

23) Restoration of land to its pre-European condition is something you can reasonably expect to find as a core component of many of the projects discussed here each year, but it's pretty uncommon when it comes to municipal parks. Not unheard of, but park districts have a broader mission than land conservation, a fact which my elementary school-aged self (not to mention my parents) greatly appreciated back in the day. The Chillicothe Park District in the northeastern tip of Peoria County is all about offering their residents a diverse set of recreational options though, as evidenced by the 49.7-acre Coal Hollow Park. Woodland, savanna, and prairie restorations are crossed by newly built trails to enable residents to experience the land as it was two centuries ago.



What's all this have to do with PLC? Plenty. With the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, last year the District expanded the park by over 80% with the acquisition of 40.2 acres of forest and farmland – all of which will be restored. Clearing of invasive species in the forest began last summer and the farmland will be planted to a prairie mixture of grasses and perennials. The forest is predominantly oak-hickory, with heavy concentrations of white, black, and red oaks, bisected by a small creek running north to south. To ensure the new property will forever be a protected asset of the community, the District partnered with PLC, which placed an easement over the entire addition. Oh, curious about the park's unusual name? There's evidence that the land was once the site of a very small-scale mining operation dug by hand.

24) Atop the hills overlooking Kickapoo Creek, in Peoria City in the County of the same name, the Elwood Wildlife Preserve is a topographically-varied refuge just outside one of the state's largest cities. Part of the Illinois River Bluffs ecosystem, the land is filled with forested moraines cut through with intermittent streams on their way to the creek and, ultimately, the Illinois River. The 76.2-acre preserve, generously donated by the former landowners, contains high quality oak barrens on the west facing slopes in the northeast. Other areas of the preserve have been colonized by prolific woody species that the Conservancy will manage as they work to restore this new natural sanctuary.



Elwood Preserve (Dave King
– Prairie Land Conservancy)

25) “Race car” isn’t exactly the first thing that typically comes to mind when you think “natural area.” Yet it’s an apt answer when you’re at the new 12.77-acre Alice’s Wetland easement in central McDonough County, west of the City of Macomb. What was until last decade a dirt racetrack has been restored to a working wetland by the property’s new owners. Working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (which has since designated the land as habitat for migratory waterfowl) via a cost sharing agreement, they constructed both berms and scrapes to restore the land’s hydrology. Following the restoration, seven bird and two invertebrate species designated by the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan as Species in Greatest Conservation Need have been found on the site. Oh, and this isn’t the first such project headed by the visionary landowners, who have also restored a 224 woodland and wetland preserve described in the 2017 edition of this report – most of which has been registered as a Land & Water Reserve, so they clearly know their stuff!



✿ The Archaeological Conservancy

26) Though The Archaeological Conservancy is a new face in these pages, it has a long, illustrious history in the state (particularly in Jo Daviess County), and this past year marked its return to Illinois in style, adding the Twin Mounds preserve to its national portfolio of historical treasures. Perched on the banks of the Illinois River north of the City of Havana in western Mason County, the 2.26-acre site contains remnants of mounds and other associated structures that were built between 200 BCE and 500 CE by the Woodland Culture. Because I certainly can’t summarize the site better than the professionals, I’ll quote now from the Illinois State Museum at Dickson Mounds, in nearby Lewiston.



“The conjoined conicals, known as the Twin Mounds, are part of a site complex that includes at least one smaller mound and an associated habitation area.

The site is one in a series of substantial village and mound complexes spaced along the central and lower Illinois River. Archaeologists have colloquially referred to these sites as belonging to the Havana Hopewell complex which flourished during the Middle Woodland period. Havana refers to a nearby town where substantial archaeological work has been conducted, while the Hopewell appellation pays homage to cultural similarities with well-known sites in Ohio. Although there are not as many large sites dedicated to the construction of geometric earthworks, the Illinois cultures share a number of common characteristics with the Hopewell of Ohio. These include shared ideological symbolism, impressive artistic expression, participation in a dynamic exchange network that spanned the mid-continent, and the building of elaborately constructed and impressive burial monuments.”

For a site of such historical significance, I'd be remiss if I didn't note that The Nature Conservancy's 6,673-acre Emiquon Preserve lies on the opposite bank of the River directly across from the newly protected mounds. Combined with the adjacent 2,588-acre Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge, the project has restored the vast floodplain ecosystem that the builders of the Mounds gazed out over centuries ago.

✿ The Conservation Foundation

27) So last year I wrote about The Conservation Foundation's purchase of a conservation easement along the Fox River in northeastern LaSalle County, across the river from the Illinois DNR's 31.4-acre Lower Fox River-Blake's Landing preserve, ending the piece by tantalizingly explaining that it was the first of two-part project that would conclude in 2020. Well guess what? To my pleasure, I can report that's *exactly* what happened. The new 65.6-acre easement is adjacent

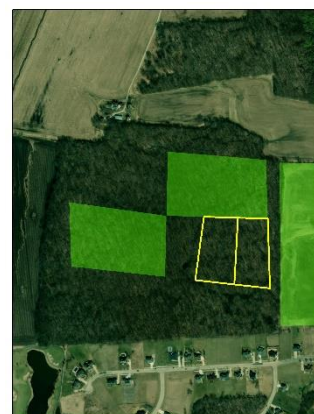


to 2019's 108.97-acre site, and like its predecessor was acquired with the support of the ***Hamill Family Foundation*** and the ***Grand Victoria Foundation***. The whole of the new easement is heavily forested, and includes *two* substantially-sized islands. To repeat what I wrote last year, since just about every word is still relevant, TCF has made the Lower Fox River a [major focus](#) of its work for much of the last decade, but this project goes even further back; all the way to 1998. The Foundation worked with the landowner over the following 20+ years, culminating in the preservation of some of the most ecologically valuable land along the waterway.



Fox River Cliffs (*The Conservation Foundation*)

28) You ever visited the Dick Young Forest Preserve in Kane County? How about the Richard Young Forest Preserve in Kendall County? Ever wonder how incredible you have to be at your job to have not one but *two* Forest Preserves named after you? Ecologist [Richard \(Dick\) Young](#) worked for the Forest Preserve District of Kane County for decades and in his spare time co-founded and directed the Kendall County Forest Preserve District. When someone's got two Preserves named after them *and* they cofounded a Forest Preserve District, it behooves the rest of us to take note when they declare a site to be "Kendall County's finest woods." That's the appellation given by Mr. Young to the small Reservation Woods in northeastern Kendall County, south of the Village of Oswego. The Foundation acquired *two* parcels within the woods last year that combine to 10.1 acres. The land is adjacent to the 26.4-acre Reservation Woods owned by the Kendall County FPD, and, with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, will be sold to the District for incorporation into the public preserve.



✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

29) The Conservancy started off the year in style, adding 4.7 acres in east central McHenry County, in the Village of Bull Valley, as an addition to the 36.4-acre Boloria Meadows preserve. The new property buffers a fen and sedge meadow complex that is *also* a 45.2-acre dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. TLC acquired the original property several years ago. I wrote in that year's annual report that the land "...offers some of the finer examples of less abundant ecosystems within the County. Nestled in a semi-developed part of the County, the site, which is adjacent to an additional 8.76 acres of Nature Preserve Buffer contains a rare high quality graminoid fen. As per the INPC, less than 400 acres of such high-quality fen still exists in the entirety of the state. Complementing the fen is a sedge meadow of similar quality and a small dry mesic forest that includes mature white and bur oaks."



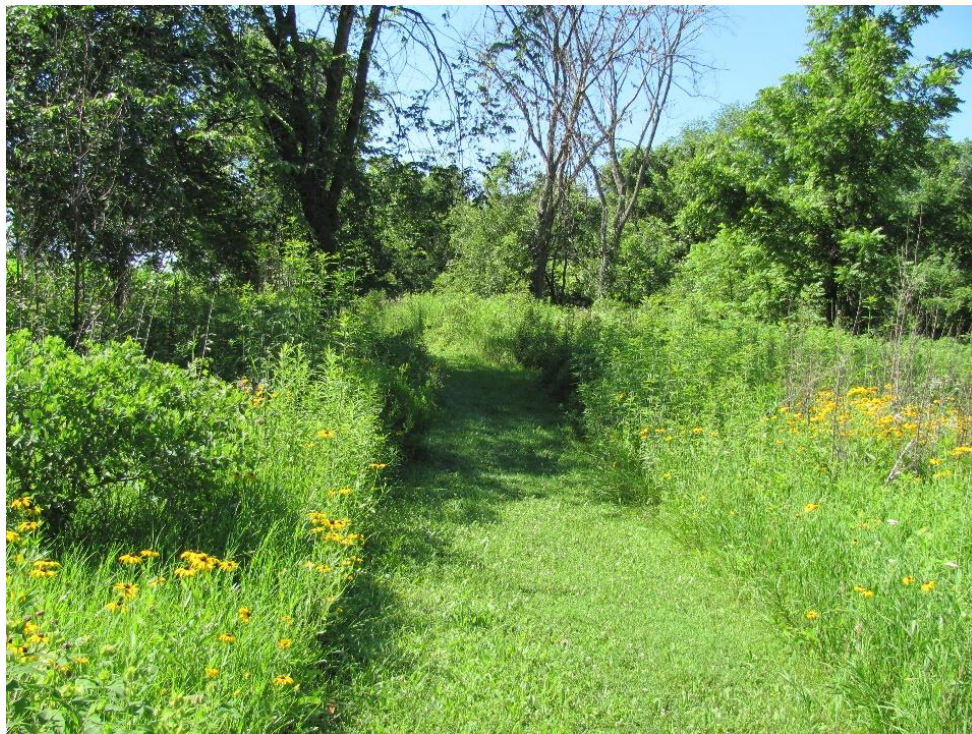
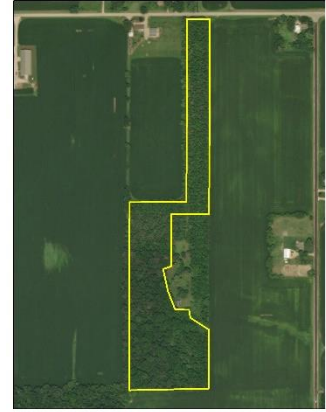
That last part is important, because the new addition incorporates ~2 additional acres of remnant oak woods with numerous native species growing in the herbaceous layer. As a bonus, the preserve is home to the Red-headed Woodpecker, the protection of which is a priority identified in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. Alongside the good though is the bad; a population of Stiltgrass, an aggressive invasive. Now this'll blow your mind. That latter fact was one of the big reasons TLC purchased the property. While the remnant oak trees and expansion of an existing preserve were reason enough to add the site, the eastern hemispheric [invader](#) was poised to do what it does best – invade – leading the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to develop a deep and abiding interest in seeing it eradicated. TLC was able to begin that process this past year, eliminating a major floral threat to what – let me reiterate – is a seriously rare vegetative community. Nice.

30) As befits the creators of [Project Quercus](#), the Conservancy's next project again had a heavy focus on McHenry County's arboreal legacy. A 17.21-acre easement in the northwest of the County, west of the City of Harvard is a forested oasis in a sea of agriculture. Around 9 acres in the south of the site are old growth remnant oak woodlands, with the rest of the property containing restored prairie and reforested woods. This mix of high-quality habitats makes it an oasis for local wildlife. That oasis was tended to for decades in the face of tragedy



by the property's former landowner, who lost two family members in a house fire and yet visited the

property often in the subsequent years to care for the land and the creatures that called it home. Upon her passing, her children honored their mother and her legacy by finding a purchaser for the property who would work with the family to craft and put in place a conservation easement – protecting for all time the land their mother had tended.



Kennedy-McCluggage Easement & landowner (*The Land Conservancy of McHenry County*)

31) Bur oaks, 200+ year old white oaks, and hickories blanket over half of a new 83.536-acre preserve that IMO is one of the highlights of TLC's work last year. Through this remnant oak woodland and south alongside a sedge meadow and former pine plantation flows the upper reaches of Mokeler Creek, a headwater stream for Piscasaw Creek – all these place names can start to run together after a while, so as a reminder, that's the waterway whose quality I was gushing over a few pages up. The varied and impressive new preserve, which buffers both a 6.4-acre Conservancy-owned site and a 13.1-acre easement was acquired with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*.



The Conservancy is going to approach restoration of that oak forest in an unusual way that I want to explore a bit. Rather than beginning in one area and then working outwards, as most restoration is performed (at least on any site I've ever worked at), they're gonna clear out the vegetation around each tree to give them breathing room, and *then* clear the areas between the trees. As many readers know, one of TLC's major initiatives is assisting private landowners in caring for remnant oaks on their property; the aforementioned Project Quercus. On the theory that most folks don't exactly have the types of resources – not to mention the time – that government conservation agencies can deploy, they're researching and experimenting with practical ways for landowners to restore their own oaks over time. This new preserve will now be a model for those efforts.

✿ The Nature Conservancy

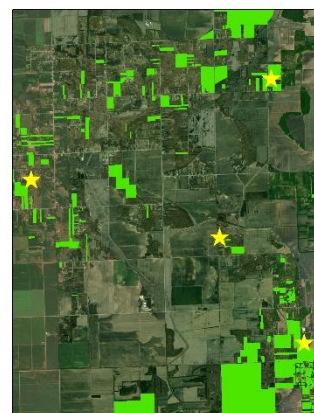
32) TNC didn't waste any time in the new year, moving quickly to expand their headline Nachusa Grasslands Preserve – home of Illinois' first herd of wild bison. The 3,695-acre site – with another 720.4 acres protected via conservation easements – grew by 0.8 acres with the purchase of a homesite (the building on which has since been removed) along the preserve's northeastern border. Surrounded by Nachusa on three sides and bordering a public road on the fourth, the new property straightens the preserve's border, simplifying restoration and management work. Oh, also, the parcel is going to be part of a *large* proposed Land & Water Reserve that I hope to be able to write all about in next year's edition of this annual review. There, now you've got something to look forward to a year from now!



33) The Indian Boundary Prairies in southern Cook County are that rarest of grasslands: unplowed native tallgrass prairie. The 78.6-acre Paintbrush Prairie in the City of Markham is no exception. One of a cluster of five sites that by chance are found in the most urbanized spot in the state, its wide diversity of plant and animal life – what TNC aptly calls a biological ark for the future – led to designation as an Illinois Nature Preserve. A half-acre addition of a former home site squares off the preserve’s southern boundary, making management of the property a good deal easier, not to mention providing an ideal tableau upon which the prairie can grow.



34) This letter wouldn’t be complete without a visit to the Kankakee Sands. The sprawling preserve in southeastern Kankakee County is spread over a good 40 square miles. With 10 Illinois Natural Area Inventory (INAI) sites within its project area, it’s no ecological slouch either. That, as my returning readers will recall, is because the land is covered by black oak savanna, which is so unusual it almost makes virgin prairie look common. What was a 2,660.5 acre preserve (with another 17.6 acres under easement) grew last year with the addition of four tracts. These 28.6 acres are spread across the preserve. The first and largest lies within the Guiding Star Savanna INAI site. The sand prairie and black oak savanna lie just a bit northeast of a property I discussed last year, and are part of the same vegetative community. Heading northeast, a small inholding squared off the boundary of a unit of the site near the Indiana border. To the south, an equally small parcel – under 2 acres in size, nonetheless manages to house both sand savanna and a remnant dune. To close this out, we arrive at the Leesville Savanna INAI and Carl N. Becker Nature Preserve, where newly acquired properties are part of the former and buffer the latter. Yeah; it was without question another banner year for the Kankakee Sands.

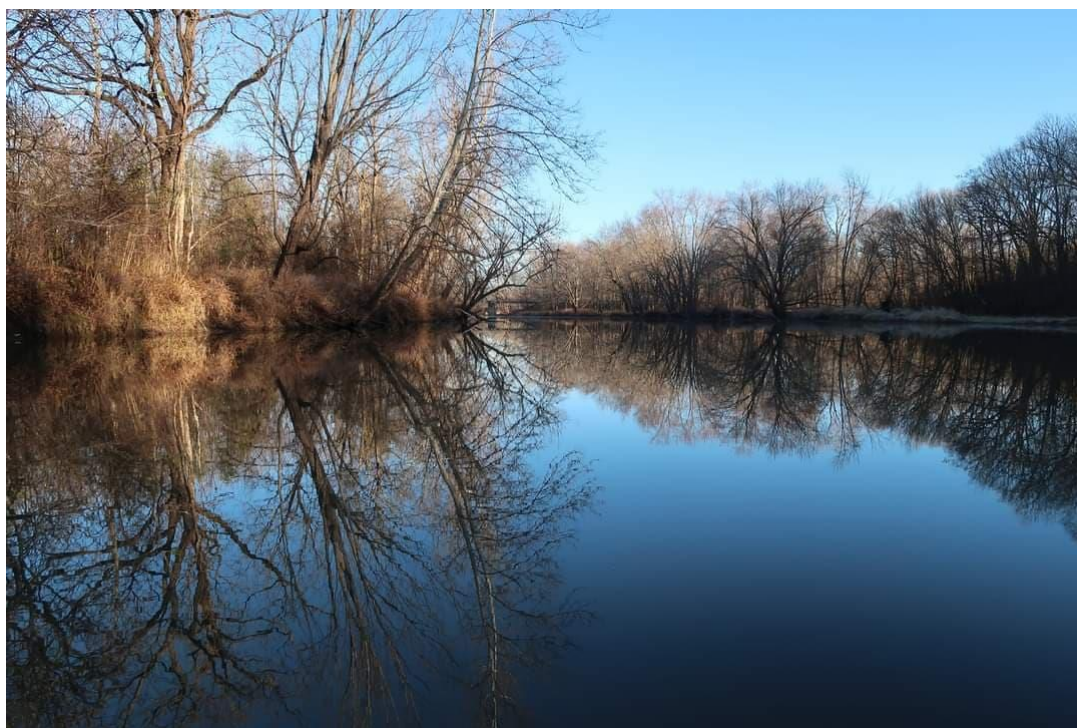


Black Oak Sand Savanna at Kankakee Sands (Fran Harty)

✿ The Nature Institute

35) The Nature Institute is new to this report, but not to Illinois conservation. A nature camp founded in the 1980s on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River south of the Village of Godfrey in Madison County, TNI protects 471 acres of wooded bluffs, wetlands, and grasslands, almost all of which have been dedicated as Illinois Nature Preserves.

Acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, a 13.9-acre addition to that land buffers both the wooded Olin Nature Preserve – home to over 300 identified native plant species and more than 150 species of birds – and the grassy Kemp and Cora Hutchinson Bird Sanctuary. Appropriately, the communities on the new property mimic both preserves, with heavy woods in the south transitioning to a grassland in the north. The Institute’s campers will benefit from the new land just as much as will its natural residents, as it offers greatly improved access to the adjacent Cypress Pond at which the camp conducts a lot of its programming.



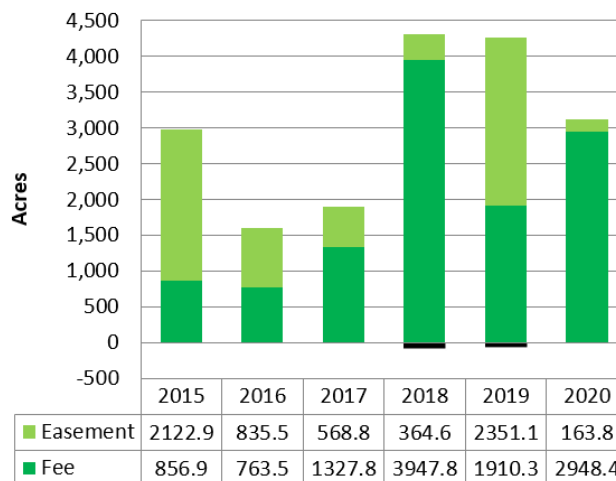
The Embarras River in Coles County (*Grand Prairie Friends*)



Public Sector Land Conservation

‘The public sector’ is a concise term encapsulating a dizzying array of programs and governments alike that collectively were responsible for more than two thirds of the natural lands protected across Illinois last year.

Preserving 2,944.5 acres, 2020 saw one of the largest increases in public sector fee-owned protection since I began writing these annual reviews. As with the private sector conservation endeavors, if a project involved the transfer or further encumbering of a property already protected, it’s described in full in the coming pages, but was not included in the graph at right, as doing otherwise would double-count the land. Similarly, if a project was the result of a public-private partnership, each party received credit for one half of the property’s total acreage.



2020 was by any definition a banner year for local government. The Forest Preserves of Winnebago County led the way with the single largest land protection project of 2020, while those of Kane and Will protected hundreds of additional acres on sites both large and small. They were joined by over half a dozen additional state and local governments to make what was in many respects an annus horribilis nationally and globally one of uplifting success in local conservation.



Starved Rock State Park (Illinois DNR – Wikimedia Commons)

✿ Boone County Conservation District

1) As described above in the “Private Sector” section of this report, the District acquired 335.11 acres with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* along the high quality Piscasaw Creek, east of the City of Belvidere. The new preserve is across a street from the District’s 13.4-acre Green Giant Prairie preserve, itself lying at the intersection of Piscasaw Creek and the Kishwaukee River. Protection of the Piscasaw Creek corridor has been a longstanding objective of the District, which owns two additional preserves along upstream portions of the waterway.



The long-term management plan for this valuable preserve is of special interest to me. Portions of the northern unit of the site are used as horse pasture, while land in the upland areas in the southern unit are in a corn/soybean crop rotation. The District will lease much of this land to the former owner to continue the agricultural operations, using the lease payments to fund the restoration and care of the rest of the site. It’s a great partnership that will provide the resources needed to care for this new preserve.

✿ Byron Forest Preserve District

2) The Jarrett Prairie Nature Preserve in northeastern Ogle County is a neat place. Home of the [Jarrett Prairie Center](#), the preserve contains a vast restored prairie with scattered woodlands and, yep, as the name suggests, 300 acres of the property is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. Last year the site grew bigger still with the addition of 19.6 acres of woodland and savanna bordering that dedicated land. Not enough to get you animated yet? Well, the Preserve surrounds the addition on not one, not two, but three sides (and on the fourth it’s bordered by a road, opposite of which is the Rock River), making it an unmistakably valuable addition to what by any reasonable definition is one of if not the jewel of the District’s lands.



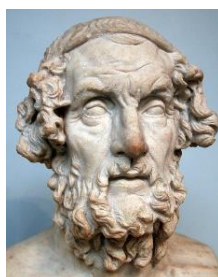
Jarrett Prairie addition (*Google Street View*)

3) I bid you a welcome return to the Howard Colman Hall Preserve on the northeastern corner of Ogle County, where in last year's report I explored a land exchange on its southern end that swapped out an agricultural field for a fine woodland and meadow. This year we move to the north side of the 283.3-acre site where a new 40.0-acre Preserve has been established that is surrounded by Howard Colman Hall on, wait for it...wait for it...not one, not two, but three sides. Yes, there is most assuredly a theme to the District's land acquisitions this year :) The new property is a heavily wooded oak-hickory forest and is adjacent to a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve Buffer along its entire eastern, western, and southern boundaries. Howard Coleman Hall and the new R. Robert Funderburg Forest Preserve are part of a multiorganizational, cross-sectoral macrosite, bordering a 90.5-acre preserve owned by The Natural Land Institute, which in turn is adjacent to a 355.8 preserve of the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County. Well, at least that was the case at the *beginning* of last year. Read on to learn how the District collaborated with its neighbor to the north – the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County – to effect one of the most impressive land protection projects of 2020.



✿ Champaign County Forest Preserve District

4) Old Homer Park is kinda like the Holy Roman Empire (neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire) in that it's neither old, nor named after *The Simpsons* character, nor is it a park. Confusing names notwithstanding, this small preserve along the Salt Fork River north of the Village of Homer in eastern Champaign County is a woodland that historically lay on the river's western bank. I say "historically" because with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, it now also encompasses the *eastern* bank. About 80% of this 15.4-acre addition is in agricultural production; the remainder is mostly forested land around the edges of the site, alongside a short stretch of the Salt Fork River on the northern border. The District will restore the ~12 acres of agricultural land to prairie over a two-year period with additional support from the Foundation. The isolated prairie-to-be won't stay isolated, as the District will also install a short road to permit public access to the site along with interpretive signage. If that's too blasé a method of entry, intrepid visitors can also visit the prairie via canoe or kayak, coming ashore from the river.



No, not that Homer
(*Wikimedia Commons*)

5) Let me tell you the story of a tiny, landlocked, forested preserve along the Sangamon River, not even five acres in size. Sorry. I've got nothing. And that about sums up this unusual site, acquired in 2004. At least it did until last year, when, with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the District acquired 93.7 acres surrounding the property, increasing the size of the preserve (newly named Heron View) by, well, 1,946% (not a typo). Located north of the Town of Mahomet in the northwestern part of the County, this for all intents brand new preserve is a wooded oasis along both banks of the Sangamon River. That river is one of the organizing features of the District, with four other preserves lying short distances both up and downstream of the new site.



✿ DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

6) The Kishwaukee River is – in perhaps the biggest understatement of this entire compendium – *rather high* on the DeKalb County FPD's priorities list. So high in fact that land protection projects from the District along the river or its tributaries have featured in [every](#) odd-year annual [report](#) I've ever [written](#). That biannual tradition was broken in 2020 as the District immediately followed up a stellar 2019 with a 102-acre acquisition supported by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** along the South Branch of the Kishwaukee southwest of the city of Genoa – the new Riverwoods Forest Preserve.



A former golf course that was closed in 2012 and subsequently sold, about half of the new preserve is in a floodplain while the other half is upland, with a maintenance building and parking facilities on the far north end. As with all Illinois Clean Energy grants, the Foundation's funds were applied towards the portion of the property that is or will be in native habitat, while the District exclusively covered the cost of the maintenance shop and parking area.

That aforementioned upland already is home to ~15 acres of oak savanna with 100-year-old oaks located at the southern end of the property near the 23.9-acre Knute Olson, Jr. Forest Preserve, which the new preserve borders. The vast majority of the preserve will be restored over the next two years and opened to the public. These efforts will involve creating or enhancing 77 acres of prairie and savanna, with another 17 acres restored to meadow. In a neat twist, some of the old sand traps will be repurposed as habitat for Blanding's turtles. All of this work has been made possible in part through a generous donation from the former landowners.

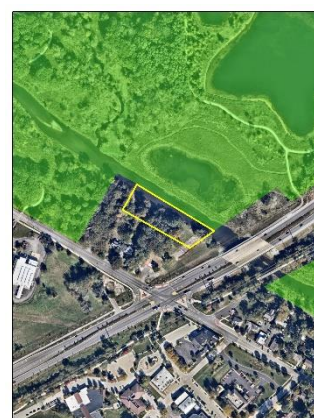
✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

7) The FPDDC decided to mix things up, geographically, acquiring a 9.5-acre wetland in northwestern DuPage County *and* eastern Kane County – betcha didn't see that second bit coming, did you? The land is situated on the border with the Village of Wayne as an addition to the 3,431.6-acre Pratt's Wayne Woods, most of which lies immediately to the east opposite a portion of the Illinois Prairie Path running through the preserve. Brewster Creek flows through the property, which transitions to upland in its north and southwest, punctuated by tree copses. The site's addition to the preserve improves the District's ability to maintain and manage the creek as it flows west to the Fox River, not to mention the wider immediate area. Why is that of value? Well, both the land to the south and east of the site has been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. Yep. That's why.



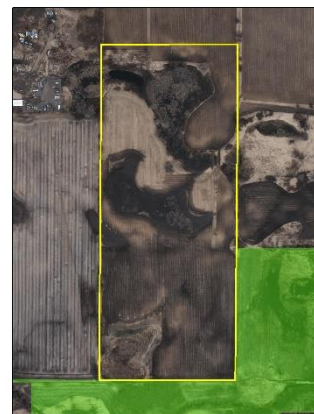
Pratt's Wayne Woods addition (*Google Street View*)

8) In the category of “this just makes sense for everyone involved”, that part of the District's 1,369.7-acre Blackwell Forest Preserve lying within the City of Warrenville grew by 1.58 acres through the donation of a partially wooded floodplain at the southern tip of the preserve. The addition lies along and contains a portion of the West Branch of the DuPage River. About 40% of the site is wetland, though as mentioned above, almost the entire property lies within the floodplain. A local firm recently purchased four parcels extending from the river south to a nearby roadway to create a single, larger developable property. While they can work with the southern upland reaches of the newly created parcel, the floodplain isn't suitable for development...but it's *very* suitable for incorporation into one of the District's largest preserves.



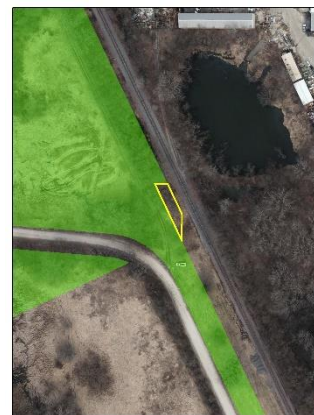
✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

9) Is there a better representative of the Forest Preserve District's unmatched growth over the last half decade than the 322-acre Binnie Forest Preserve in northern Kane County? There is not. Also, that was a rhetorical question. For the fourth year in a row, the District has expanded this increasingly inspiring preserve, this time with a 99.8-acre addition of wetlands (including an ADID wetland, which is fun, I would say) and agricultural fields that, as with the previous three acquisitions, is on its northwestern corner. Actually, that description is becoming increasingly inapt, 'cause at this point well over half of the preserve is located in what was originally a far northern outpost of the larger site. That's how much it's grown since 2017.



All four properties are part of a former wetland complex that drains into an early tributary of the South Branch of the Kishwaukee River, and will be restored and planted to native vegetation. The Preserve isn't an isolated natural resource either. Copying and pasting from *several* of my prior reports (my thanks to the fine folks at the FPDKC and the District's Board for purchasing land that gives me an excuse to reuse old material rather than having to come up with something original 😊) the Binnie Preserve "is itself adjacent to both a restored wetland preserve owned by the Dundee Township Open Space District and a large conservation easement held by the 501(c)3 land trust The Conservation Foundation. Adjacent to these two sites are two additional Dundee Township OSD preserves." All told, there are 745 contiguous acres of integrated public and privately protected natural lands. Layers upon layers to this project, am I right?

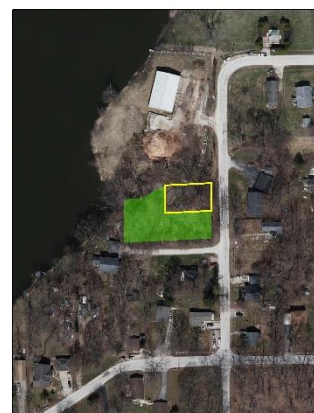
10) The format of this section of the report isn't too complicated. Describe each and every land protection project, do it in sequential temporal order for each organization, and include a pretty picture to give a splash of color and some context to my blathering, with the description being long enough to wrap the text around. Welp, last year the FPD of Kane County acquired from its County government...0.06 acres (for context, about twice as large as a good-sized apartment) of wooded wetland adjacent to a rail line as an addition to the 1,351.7-acre Freeman Kame-Meagher Forest Preserve in the northern reaches of the County, adjacent to the Village of Gilberts. Yeah...it's a small piece of land that makes sense as part of the adjacent Forest Preserve, but doesn't exactly lend itself to a long narrative. You like how I got around that problem by instead talking about how I structure the report? Well, I do. Lay off. How would you have handled this one? Send me your suggestions.



11) Three years ago, I described an addition to the Sauer Family Prairie Kame Forest Preserve in the south of Kane County, explaining that the preserve is centered around a remnant prairie atop a kame that looks out over the landscape. What I didn't mention at the time is that Native American tools have been found on that prairie, demonstrating that it's been a vantage point for centuries if not longer. A 116.5-acre addition on the western side of the 230.7-acre preserve affords the District the opportunity to further their restoration of the land those women and men looked out over so long ago, returning the property to a mix of wetland and prairie. In the near term, the land will be maintained in agricultural production, providing a continuing stream of revenue for the District's county-wide restoration efforts.



12) The land conservation Trickster God (Loki, Coyote, and Anansi's lesser-known sibling) decided to get a laugh out of watching me narratively struggle, and so decreed that in addition to the 0.06-acre property described above, in 2020 the District would also acquire... a 0.14-acre property. As an addition to the massive 3.5-acre Valley View Lots preserve... that is itself divided into eight scattered units. [< sigh >](#). OK. *Let's do this!* The Valley View Lots site lies within an unincorporated residential community in a ~0.25x0.75 square mile area. The addition is part of a 0.35-acre wooded unit of the larger – and I use that term in a relative sense – preserve located along the Fox River. Comical exasperation aside, I'd be neglecting my duty to my readers if I failed to note that the property was donated to the District by the generous landowning family.



13) The 328-acre Great Western Trail stretches across over ¾ of Kane County, beginning at the City of St. Charles and running west for 15 miles to the City of Sycamore in neighboring DeKalb County. Designed for active recreational pursuits, this mostly linear preserve isn't a one



Great Western Trail
(Lpangelrob – Wikimedia Commons)

trick pony. It also takes in the occasional natural area, as is the case at the intersection of the Villages of Lily Lake and Campton Hills in the middle of the County. A 56.36-acre addition begins with upland hills just off the trail that host scattered woodlands including a few mature oaks, descending to a wetland through which runs a small tributary of Ferson Creek. The land then rises again to the south, transitioning to an agricultural field over the southern third of the property.



14) The 238-acre Grunwald Farms Forest Preserve in southwestern Kane County off of Interstate 88 was created in 2006 with the purchase of two properties. In the east, a mix of agricultural fields, a fen, and a kame all lay west of Blackberry Creek as it flows south through the preserve. In the west, a sand and gravel mine was repurposed into a fishing lake surrounded by grassland. It's this western unit that was enlarged last year, with the addition of an 11.3-acre agricultural field growing corn and soybeans. What? Look, there's only so much I have to work with here. It's a farm field. Not every project description's gonna sparkle with literary charm or witty asides. That doesn't mean it's not deserving of recognition.



Grunwald Farms Forest Preserve's new agricultural field (*Google Street View*)

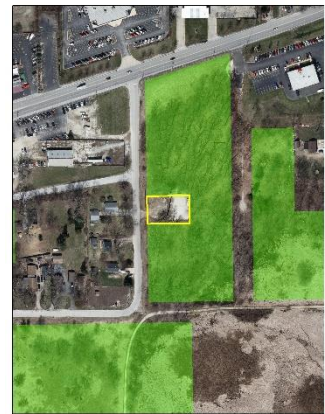
15) While we're on the subject of farm fields, the District's 402-acre Hannaford Woods/Nickels Farm Forest Preserve nestled between the Village of Sugar Grove in the south of the County is 21.9 acres larger following the purchase of an agricultural field in its southeastern corner. This property was a three-fer. It squares off the preserve, it's immediately adjacent to and so buffers the aforementioned Blackberry Creek – the defining feature of the preserve, and it's situated across a residential road from the District's 234.8-acre Bliss Woods Forest Preserve through which the creek continues to run. The former preserve is a tapestry of meadow, wetland, and woodland, while the latter protects part of a glacial kame that *somehow* wasn't mined for gravel last century.



16) The central feature of Johnson's Mound, in south central Kane County outside the Village of Elburn, is the heavily wooded kame that was the inspiration for its establishment in the 1920s (yep, that's right. The preserve's 100th birthday is coming up towards the end of the decade). Rapidly expanded over the course of the 21st century, the preserve is today divided into four units, separated by private property and public roads. Well, it *was* separated into four units until the addition of 25 acres of open fields, a homesite and small pond last year combined the two western pieces into one cohesive whole, which I think most all of you reading this would agree is generally a good thing.



17) The Oakhurst Forest Preserve is something of a rarity; 393.4 acres of forest, grassland, wetland and open water in the heart of a major urban area. Nestled in the City of Aurora in the southeast corner of the County, the preserve's defining feature is a 46-odd acre lake excavated to serve as flood control for the city that now does double duty as a prime spot for boating and fishing. But we're not here to talk about the lake. Or the sledding hill that resulted from that project. Instead, we're looking to the north, at a series of small woodlands and wetlands bisected by rights-of-way that collectively form the northwestern border of the preserve. A small 0.3-acre parcel, the addition squares off one of the preserve's boundaries. I wish to point out that I just successfully described another project of under half an acre, this time without having to resort to comic protestations about the lack of narrative material to work with. And I'm *sure* that was the last time I'll need to deal with a mini-acquisition this year. Yep; clear sailing from here.



Not the addition, no, but still the Oakhurst Forest Preserve (*Google Street View*)

18) Volo Bog is demonstrably one of the brightest of the ecological jewels in the state of Illinois. Strong words you say. To which I respond that it was the very first site the newly created Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy devoted its efforts to successfully protecting way back in 1958. I then drop the mic and walk away in triumph. What's Volo Bog, an IDNR-owned preserve in Lake County, got to do with a discussion of the Forest Preserve District of Kane County's successes? Everything. 20 miles south of Volo Bog, bordering the Village of Huntley is Rutland Bog; unsurprisingly the only bog in Kane County. Comprising about a quarter of a 168.3-acre addition to the 294.4-acre Rutland Forest Preserve, during one survey 1 in every 5 species identified on the site were rare and 1 in 10 plants were classified as Threatened or Endangered. The balance of the addition is a mix of agricultural fields and wetlands that will be restored to forest, prairie and wetland, buffering and enhancing the bog ecosystem.



The aforementioned Volo Bog (*McGhievers* – *Wikimedia Commons*)

✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

19) The heavily wooded 189.3-acre Moeller Woods Forest Preserve in the northeastern corner of the County had something of a growth spurt last year, more than doubling in size. The 201.75-acre addition, separated from the main body of the preserve by a public road, has a profile quite different from the rest of the site. The mostly agricultural land is bisected by a small creek that feeds into Plum Creek shortly before the waterway enters the original preserve. That makes the property a twofer, as restoration of the land will not only provide a larger area of contiguous habitat (more so than this description suggests, as Moeller Woods is part of a network of near coterminous preserves combining to over 3,700 acres owned by the Forest Preserve Districts of Will and neighboring Cook Counties) but also through that restoration improve the quality of the waterway as it flows through first Moller Woods and thence other preserves in the system.



20) Long time readers know that I routinely geek out over old roadway rights-of-way that are primed to be vacated. Normal people on the other hand get excited by new trails affording residents opportunities to hike, bike, jog, and slog through the state's parks and natural refuges. This project from the good folks at the Forest Preserve District of Will County... ..has *both*! I know; the thrill is almost too much to bear. A 0.38-acre addition to the District's Riverview Farmstead Preserve in the City of Naperville is sandwiched between Old Book Road and the DuPage River. With this acquisition the District now owns the land on either side of the road (which dead ends just to the north of the addition), empowering it to vacate 1,300' of the right-of-way. That'll connect the north of the preserve with what's presently a lonely parcel east of the road, in turn enabling them to build a trail that will run the length of preserve.



21) What do you get the preserve that already has it all; forests and prairies, streams and wetlands? You get it a golf club, of course. At the northeastern tip of the County on the state line, the 200.16-acre former club – which includes ~35 acres of forest in the south and a small portion of Plum Creek in the north – takes the Plum Valley Ravines preserve of which it's now a part to over 1,000 acres. Acquired to expand wildlife habitat and, as importantly, maintain the larger floodplain, the land will be restored to a mix of forest and wetlands. Fun fact: the newly protected property *also* adds to a network of interconnected preserves encompassing over 2,000 acres in both Will and neighboring Cook Counties.



22) At the tail end of the year, the District was the recipient of a generous donation east of the Village of Beecher, in the extreme southeast of the County. The 40-acre property is a gift twice over, being part of a 160-acre conservation easement granted in 2013 over a farm and large wetland. The new preserve is entirely in agricultural production, with a farmstead on the eastern border. It gets even better though. This donation is but the latest in a continuing process. The entire property will eventually be transferred to the District, creating Will County's newest forest preserve in an area heretofore devoid of such a public resource.



23) Last year I wrote about the expansion of the 752.8-acre Hadley Valley preserve. Part of an 8-mile greenway stretching along Spring Creek, I also touched on the District's re-meandering of over half a mile of the creek that wends through the preserve last decade, and explained that the site is made up of four units separated by roads and private holdings. I've gotta amend that last bit, because with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, the District closed out the year in style, adding 40.15 acres immediately south of the Village of Homer Glen to close the last gap. Immediately northeast of the parcel discussed last year, this latest addition is bisected by a small feeder stream flowing into Spring Creek at its southeastern tip. A semi-wooded residential area in the southwest transitions to agricultural fields over the balance of the site which will be restored to prairie and savanna.



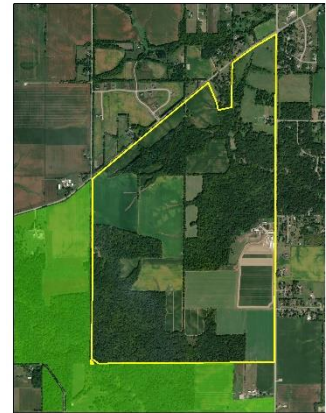
Hadley Valley (Forest Preserve District of Will County)

✿ Forest Preserves of Winnebago County

24) Anyone else notice this's been a big year for the Kishwaukee River? Land protection projects along the river or its tributaries have featured prominently in this report in Boone, DeKalb and Kane counties. I've talked a lot this year about the waterway's upper reaches, so it's only appropriate to close our review of the Kish with a project near its mouth as it flows into the Rock. The Forest Preserves of Winnebago County have spent decades protecting and restoring this most prominent portion of the river. That work continued in 2020 with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** as the District acquired 106.5 acres abutting the river as it flows southwest shortly after exiting neighboring Boone County. An addition to the 209-acre Kishwaukee River Forest Preserve, the mostly wooded property with a small agricultural field creates a nearly unbroken link with the neighboring 227.4-acre Rockford Rotary preserve.



25) Hey, remember how like nine pages ago I promised a dramatic follow up to the Byron Forest Preserve District's work at one of their preserves? Let no one claim I fail to keep my promises. Severson Dells, about half of which is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve, is a 355.8-acre site on the County's southern border. It's adjacent to a 90.5-acre preserve owned by the nonprofit Natural Land Institute which in turn borders two preserves owned by the Byron FPD totaling 323.3 acres...and much of *those* sites are *also* dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves. All well and good. Thing is, the District just expanded this already impressive patchwork of interconnected preserves. A lot. Like, they more than doubled it. A new 851.1 acre preserve east of the District's Severson Dells preserve contains about half of an oak-hickory forest that the three partner organizations have all worked to protect (and which is the focus on the Nature Preserve dedications). Forests throughout the site are interspersed with pasture and agricultural field. A residence and farming infrastructure on the eastern border round out the site.



Funderburg Forest Preserve (*Forest Preserves of Winnebago County*)

The land's protection was made possible through vision and generosity both; neither would have been enough on its own. The acquisition was not only strongly supported by the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, which helped fund the purchase of those portions of the property that are forested or in agricultural production. Just as essentially, the former landowner donated to the District nearly half the assessed value of the property, in the process creating a legacy that all the County's residents will be able to enjoy generation after generation.

✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

26) At the behest of local residents, the federal government spent a decade starting in the 1950s building a reservoir south of the City of Vandalia at the intersection of Bond, Clinton, and Fayette Counties to contain flooding from the Kaskaskia River. You may ask why it took a decade to dig a glorified hole in the ground. The answer is that this was no ordinary reservoir. It's a 25,000+ acre ginormous hole, dubbed Carlyle Lake. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers administers the engineering behemoth, leasing ~6,400 acres of woodland, wetlands, and grassland north of the lake to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The IDNR owns an additional 837.6 acres adjacent to the leased property which functions as a State Fish and Wildlife Area...to which last year it added 80 acres of forest and grassland, both of which are part of expansive tracts that spill over from the existing preserve.



27) We move now from southern Illinois to northern Illinois. Really northern Illinois. Like, you're staring across the border at Wisconsin northern Illinois. Elizabeth Lake is a 346.2-acre McHenry County Conservation District (MCCD) preserve on the state line, 70% of which has been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve or Nature Preserve Buffer. That includes all of the western half of the site. Why is that relevant? Because the DNR has established the brand new 56.1-acre Elizabeth Lake State Natural Area bordering these highly protected sites. What's more, the new SNA – a mix of sedge meadow and mesic savanna (including well-established oaks) which the MCCD will assist in managing – fills a hole in the County preserve, providing a buffer to the dedicated land. Management was actually the biggest motivating factor in seeing the property protected, as the land is essential to effectively managing the adjacent District preserve.



McHenry County CD - Elizabeth Lake (Maire Isenberg)

28) Continuing with the theme of “having an Illinois Nature Preserve next door to your new project is a bloody good sign that you’re doing something right”, I invite you to turn your attention to the Hitts Siding Prairie State Natural Area in southern Will County, west of the City of Wilmington. The 260.2-acre preserve contains marsh, sand prairie, and the super rare sand savanna. The site is part of a closely packed network of preserves owned by the IDNR and Will County Forest Preserve District south of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie over an area not even 5x10 miles square that protects, to quote the Forest Preserve District “8,000 insect species and 750 native plant species as well as birds, mammals, reptiles, mosses and mushrooms.” A 2.7-acre wooded addition along the property’s northern boundary helps rationalize the preserve’s borders and in so doing improve the ability to effectively manage the land.



29) Next up, we’ve got a tiny addition to a huge site. The 16,500+* acre Kaskaskia River State Fish and Wildlife Area straddles Monroe, Randolph, and St. Clair Counties offering recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat alike. The District acquired a 1.1-acre property surrounded by the SFWA on three sides. Located at a public access point in northern Randolph County, northwest of the Town of Baldwin, the addition is mostly an open field, with several buildings and a parking lot found on its eastern border along a public road.



* Shocked that I of all people used an approximation there? It’s eating me up inside, I assure you. The SFWA transits a waterway [held in trust](#) for the people of the State of Illinois whose legal geographic boundary I’m uncertain of. That means I can’t definitively nail down the acreage number.



Illinois’ best-known body of water. *Also held in trust for the good people of the State (Állatka – Wikimedia Commons)*

30) The Department of Natural Resources provides recreational opportunities and protects natural habitats in almost every one of the state's 102 counties – befitting an agency that serves all of Illinois' citizens. Almost every county, but not quite all of 'em. That's why it's a pleasure to note that last year the saw the removal of Calhoun from the handful of counties that are still devoid of a DNR preserve with the acquisition of a 27.85-acre Illinois Nature Preserve dedicated in 1999. Near the north line of the County ~10 miles from the Mississippi River, the new Mississippi River Area State Fish and Wildlife Area lies along Illinois Route 96, dividing the flat river floodplain on the west from the hilly, forested land to the east. The preserve is an excellent representative of the wider region, with dense forest along steep hills that quickly rise over 200 feet.



31) At the northern tip of the state on the Wisconsin border is an Illinois State Natural Area of such ecological quality that it was among the earliest Land & Water Reserves ever created. Ya got a bit of déjà vu there, right? Thinking maybe I messed up and was about to describe the Elizabeth Lake project in McHenry County again? Nope! We're mixing things up, moving east from McHenry to Lake County. I know; variety.



The 1,049-acre Redwing Slough State Natural Area (SNA) is a glacial marsh that's been a focus on preservation work by both DNR and the local County Forest Preserve for decades. As I described in the 2017 edition of this report, a wetland mitigation bank restored the natural hydrology to the land immediately north of the main body of the site, and was eventually added to the preserve. A 30.3-acre addition last year buffers the restored wetlands and establishes more defensible boundaries. The new property is underlain by a mix of hydric and upland soils; a small northerly extension of a wetland that is part of the existing site will be managed as an integrated unit, while an agricultural field that covers the majority of the property will be restored to prairie.



Redwing Slough State Natural Area (*Google Street View*)

32) Siloam Springs State Park, straddling Adams and Brown Counties around ten miles to the west of the Village of Versailles, is a wooded, hilly oasis offering a plethora of recreational opportunities – camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, boating, bird watching; the Powers That Be really went all out. At 5,862.3 acres divided between two units, it's been a popular local spot of respite for decades; residents raised a significant share of the funds used to create the park in 1940. The heavily wooded western unit grew by 170.1 acres last year with the acquisition of an equally forested property lying less than a mile to the east of a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve that's also on park land. For those keeping track, that makes this the fifth DNR project of the year that's either a dedicated site itself or buffers an existing Nature Preserves or Land & Water Reserves.



33) At the northern tip of the state on the Wisconsin border...yep, we're doing this again...is a Department preserve of such quality that nearly 70% of it has been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve...I know; the similarities between these things are uncanny...one of the first few dozen Preserves ever dedicated. The 101.7-acre Rockton Bog State Natural Area in northeastern Winnebago County is rather varied, containing sedge meadow, prairie, shrub, and open sand forest. The preserve was expanded quite significantly last year, with the addition of 56.71 acres along its southern extent. The addition buffers existing dedicated Nature Preserve from end-to-end, and is home to sand forest, grassland, and agricultural fields. The northwestern corner has long been identified as a priority for protection, serving as it does as the southernmost reach of the extant forest.



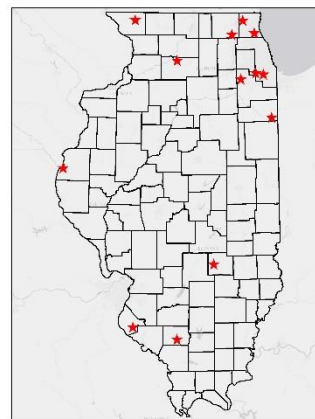
34) The Hidden Springs State Forest in eastern Shelby County shelters seven springs that provided drinking water for early settlers. That'd be quite a feat if they couldn't be found, but they weren't hidden at the time. Vegetative growth over the intervening centuries has since obscured many of 'em, but they're still there – protected within this 1,096.2-acre preserve. Or at least, it was 1,096.6 acres. The season of giving having just passed, it's appropriate that the DNR's final new property of the year was a gift. 10 acres of dense forest are bordered by the state land to both east and west, going some way towards stitching two segments of the forest into a single whole.



✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

Over the last twelve months, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission added 1,559.74 acres to a system that now encompasses ~116,450 acres. The balance of Nature Preserves to Land & Water Reserves was more balanced last year when compared to the previous few years, with 937.3 acres of new or expanded Nature Preserves/Nature Preserve Buffers and 622.44 acres of Land & Water Reserves.

A bit over 15% of the newly dedicated and registered land is owned by private individuals. Most of that – 161.3 acres – previously lacked any form of protection. While 2019 was big on all-new sites, last year was more balanced. Five new Land & Water Reserves were created and one expanded, while the Nature Preserves went in the opposite direction, with two new Preserves and five often large expansions. 70% of the dedications and registrations last year were on land owned by the private sector – both individuals and conservation land trusts. By acreage though, the public sector staged a comeback, as just over 1,000 acres were dedicated as Nature Preserves, mostly by the County Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts serving the greater Chicago area. That’s a lot of numbers I just threw out, even for me. Executive summary? The INPC did yeoman’s work, missing nary a beat through a year when they couldn’t even visit properties for months on end.



✿ Lake County Forest Preserve District

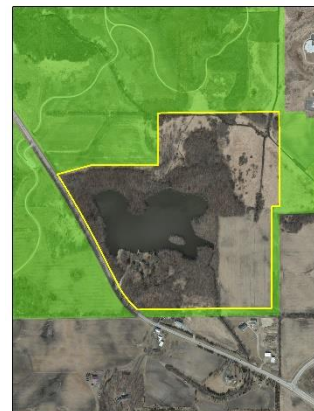
35) Inholdings are management headaches and the bane of mapmakers who, I presume, dread the inevitable question of “hey, what’s that?” every time someone looks at their work of cartographical art. Seeking to spare both their management and public affairs teams this burden, the LCFPD added 0.65 acres along with a 0.35-acre conservation easement to the Kettle Grove Forest Preserve, in western Lake County directly east of the Village of Volo. An abandoned family cemetery that is completely surrounded by the Preserve, the District and then owner (the local Township) determined that only the southern third of the property had ever been used for burials. The Township granted an easement over this ground to facilitate ecological restoration and management of the larger property, and simultaneously deeded to the District the unused northern two-thirds of the parcel. By acquiring title to a portion of the property and an easement that includes the right to manage the land as a native prairie to the remainder, the District made their maps cleaner but also, of obviously far less import, gained the ability to control invasive woody species that previously intruded onto the surrounding Preserve.



36) If you ever find yourself traveling through the western reaches of Lake County, east of the Village of Wauconda, you're in for a treat. The adjacent Lakewood and Ray Lake Forest Preserves combine for 3,839 acres of prairies, wetlands, and forests – the largest agglomeration of protected natural land in the County. That expansive refuge grew last year with a 125.1-acre addition to the 1,032.2-acre Ray Lake Forest Preserve. Purchased in two separate transactions from the same landowner, the addition closes a hole in the District's ownership, which will facilitate management of the property as an integrated preserve.

Given the sheer size of the macrosite, that's a nice benefit.

The property itself is a diverse assemblage of... (take a deep breath. There is a *lot* here) woodland, a lake, a house and yard, several channelized streams alongside part of Squaw Creek in its northeastern corner, wetlands, including a large area of high-quality Advanced Identification Wetlands and, in the southeast, a 20-acre agricultural field.



37) We head north now to the central reaches of the County, where the District acquired 2.2 acres as an addition to the 1,223.7-acre Rollins Savanna Forest Preserve. This small parcel abuts Illinois Route 83, making it a natural boundary for the preserve. A large wetland that is almost entirely contained within the preserve has its southern tip at the very northwest corner of the addition (yay for unified management), the rest of which is wooded upland. The name notwithstanding, much of Rollins Savanna is a huge – 'huge' in the context of suburban Chicagoland at least – prairie restoration with a miles long trail circling the property. It's on the north though that you'll find the tremendous oaks that give the site its name. Take a look at the photo below, taken by yours truly hobbling along a trail a week after getting tossed from a bike, all so I don't have to contend with copyright. I've been to a lot of 'savannas', but precious few that really live up to the name as Rollins so clearly does.



Rollins Savanna (*Gimping David Holman*)

38) A floodplain forest is a worthy addition to most preserves, and this 5.6-acre property that rounds out the southern edge of just such a forest on the 228.2-acre Half Day Forest Preserve in the Village of Lincolnshire is no exception. That said, the property was acquired for another, very specific purpose: the Des Plaines River Trail runs right through it. The Trail, a multi-decade project that now extends unbroken from the Wisconsin state line in the north to the border of Cook County in the south, was built across the parcel via a revocable permit granted by the former owner, the Illinois Dept. of Transportation. IDOT developed a plan to make road improvements elsewhere in the County that necessitated both temporary and permanent easements from the District along the edge of another Preserve. In return for these easements, which totaled less than an acre, the Department gave to the District this much larger property that benefits both its recreational and ecological pursuits in equal measure.



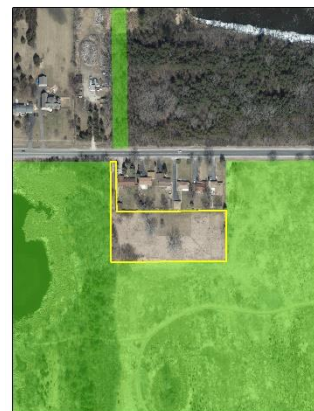
39) You know the old line “just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that they *aren’t* out to get you”? The Chicagoland Forest Preserve Districts are out to get me. The FPD of Kane County launched the assault with three friggig acquisitions less than a ¼ acre in size. As I stood dazed but seemingly triumphant having written project descriptions of sufficient verbosity for each, the Lake County FPD followed that up with a 0.16-acre addition to the 583.9-acre Fox River Forest Preserve on the border with neighboring McHenry County. This small parcel lies on the Fox River, and was acquired from the County government, into whose hands it had passed for nonpayment of property taxes. And now it squares off a corner of the Preserve. The end!



40) ... That was the sound of my already tenuous sanity snapping as I learned that fate had decreed I write another narrative this year for an acquisition of less than an acre. This one’s actually gonna be quite familiar to any who joined me last year for the 2019 edition of this report. The District previously acquired – via both an acquisition and right-of-way vacation – 1.88 acres in the southwest corner of the 353.4-acre Duck Farm Forest Preserve outside the Village of Lake Villa. Last year continued the process of protecting an Advanced Identification (i.e. high-quality) wetland that extends just a bit south and west of the preserve with the purchase of 0.9 wetland acres directly north of that earlier project. The property was acquired at the County’s tax sale which, as I’ve discussed in previous reports, is just about the most cost-efficient tool in existence for acquiring quality natural areas, whether you’re a public agency or a private nonprofit.



41) To close out the year, the District turned its gaze to the 1,212.9-acre Grant Woods Forest Preserve next to the Village of Lake Villa in the northwest of the County. The name notwithstanding, Grant Woods contains a mix of not only forest but prairie, wetland, agriculture, even a bog. Much of the site is a high-quality natural area – 289.8 acres were added to an existing Illinois Nature Preserve just last year; a big part of the successful 2020 enjoyed by the INPC as discussed above. The property is also one of the more popular in the District, with biking, fishing, canoeing and – as the text message photos I routinely receive from a good friend year-round attest – hiking with your four-legged friends who are good boys and girls, yes they are. A new 2.7-acre open field north of a restored prairie on the eastern side of the preserve will be similarly restored, which I think all can agree is a fine plan.



A satisfied visitor at Grant Woods (*Kristin Tomalavage*)

✿ McHenry County Conservation District

42) The Nippersink Canoe Base preserve continued its steady growth last year thanks to a cooperative partnership between the Conservation District and County government. This small, disconnected wooded 0.34-acre addition to the 331.2 acre preserve in the County's northeast, east of the Village of Spring Grove lies at the southernmost end of the site. Longtime readers will recall several other small additions to this preserve over the last several years. In common with those acquisitions (as well as a project completed by the Lake County Forest Preserve District described above), the property initially came into public ownership following the failure of a prior owner to pay property taxes. This often transpires when a property owner decides that it's no longer economical to maintain ownership of a property and is unable to secure a buyer for the land. The parcel passed to McHenry County, from whom the District purchased the land at greatly reduced cost. The County gets land off its books, and the Conservation District expands its preserve. That, if I do say so myself, is the *definition* of a win-win.



43) Oak trees of all sorts, you may have heard, are kinda, sorta important. They're also quite cool, often living for hundreds of years and growing to massive sizes. More to the point, they're keystone species, maintaining and regulating both the faunal and floral communities around them. It's for this reason Coral Woods, in the southwest of the County outside the City of Marengo, draws my interest. The 780.1-acre preserve contains one of only eight 100+ acre oak groves in McHenry County that have stood for a century or more, alongside numerous other smaller agglomerations. A 19.5-acre addition on the southeast side of the Preserve protects another 10 acres of mature oak woodland in one of these smaller nearby groves, alongside grassland and an agricultural field. For good measure, an *additional* 2.198 acres of oak woods were protected via a conservation easement.

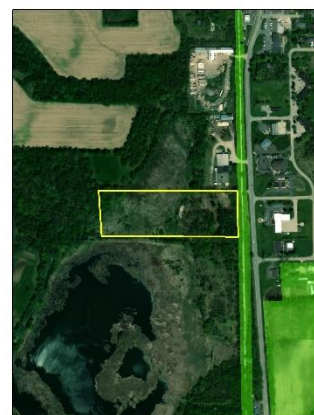


✿ United States Fish and Wildlife Service

44) Back in 2017 I wrote about the then nascent project by Openlands to acquire properties in the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, describing a 33.56-acre site straddling both sides of the annually-heralded-in-this-report Nippersink Creek that was buffered by wetlands and agricultural fields. Bordering the site to the north was a second Openlands-owned property, both acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. The following year, the northern property was sold to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to become the first federally-owned parcel in the National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge became a bit larger last year, as the second parcel was itself sold to the Service. The now 60.5-acre riverine preserve is in turn adjacent to a 26.1-acre conservation easement held by The Land Conservancy of McHenry County; the entire corridor lies within one of the Refuge's Core Areas, which is a professional way of saying this is the *good* stuff.



45) The Hackmatack refuge didn't subsist on a lonely one-off expansion last year. Following up on their cooperative venture on the Refuge's west side, Openlands also sold to the USFWS 10.82 acres of woodland and wetlands on its eastern side in the Village of Richmond. Again in one of the Refuge's Core Areas, this small parcel, adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's Prairie Trail North was purchased by the nonprofit in 2016 with support from the ***Grand Victoria Foundation***. At the time of its acquisition, it was the first piece of that planned corridor I discussed about thirty pages back linking the McHenry County Conservation District's Glacial Park Conservation Area and North Branch Preserve.





Natural Areas Restoration & Management

The last twelve months have borne witness to a multitude of restoration and management projects, large and small. As is my wont, I focus here on some that are unusual or representative of the work being done across the state, on the invaluable programs that make such work possible and, new this year, a history lesson!



Kankakee Sands (*Chris Light – Wikimedia Commons*)

- ✿ Long time readers know that I love me some stream re-meandering. Last year the **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County** returned to form, [restoring](#) roughly a mile of Spring Brook Creek – a tributary of the West Branch of the DuPage River – in the southern half of their Blackwell preserve. The project built on a 2015 effort on the next-door St. James Farm wherein an upstream portion of the Creek – turned into a straight as an arrow drainage ditch in the early 1900s – was returned to all of its curving glory.



Spring Brook Creek re-meandering
(*FPD of DuPage County*)

Oh, and as a bonus, the project featured another [of my favorite things](#). Dam removal! The now former dam had created a shallow oxygen-starved impoundment, so not only did the dam prevent fish from migrating upstream – to and through that already restored portion of the stream – but even if they'd gotten through, they'd have likely suffocated in the freaking pond. To top things off, nonnative and invasive species were replaced all along the restored waterway's path with natives, a flood prone trail was rerouted, and bridges were built and reconstructed. I wanted to lead off this section with something exciting, and the District's efforts meant I could without question do so.

- ✿ Blanding's Turtles have had a generally crappy century or so, as habitat fragmentation and increased predation from the likes of [this](#) escaped convict drove these gentle reptiles onto the global endangered list. This did not sit well with conservationists, who've been comprehensively working to reverse that decline. A veritable Who's Who in Illinois conservation completed a project last year that significantly [increased](#) the turtle populations at two major preserves in Lee



County. **The Nature Conservancy's** Nachusa Grasslands and the **Richardson Wildlife Foundation** are now home to over 70 turtles raised by the **Lake County Forest Preserve District** (whose own recovery program has been an ongoing success for years), supported by the **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County** and tracked & released by **Northern Illinois University**. They joined less than 20 of their semi-aquatic brethren remaining on the sites and with luck and care can create sustaining populations that will in turn one day seed other preserves throughout the County and region. *(Photo credit: Andrew C – Wikimedia Commons)*

- ✿ It's a little-known fact, but all living things require sustenance. I know, wild, right? This inconvenient reality presents something of a problem for the state's insects – and by extension, the birds and bats that eat said insects – on account of the fact that large swaths of the landscape've been converted to turf or agriculture. The **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** is tackling this problem across multiple vectors, two of which are complementary. The [K-12 Pollinator Schools Grant Program](#), as I've discussed in previous years, is designed to make native habitat accessible to children, parents, and their local communities through the installation of pollinator habitat of generally 1,000-2,500 sq ft (a select few larger projects cover multiple acres of land). 10 such grants were awarded last year to schools across northern, central, and southern Illinois. To this is added the new [Pollinator Meadows](#) grant program. Operating on a larger geographic scale, the program provides financial support to assist local governments and nonprofits in converting turf grass to pollinator habitat. In its inaugural year, 13 grants were awarded to municipalities, park districts, and colleges across the state, which is not a bad way to start things off.

- ✿ A few years ago I briefly touched on a program at the **Illinois Department of Natural Resources** that is reintroducing the [Alligator Gar](#) into Illinois waters. This massive fish typically grows to 4-6 feet in length and weigh 100-160 lbs, though if that's not big enough for you it can reach 10 feet and 350 lbs.



Alligator Gar (*ProjectManhattan*
– *Wikimedia Commons*)

Extirpated from Illinois by the 1960s, there's been a concerted effort this century to restore them to their historic range. Together with **The Nature Conservancy**, 45 Gar hatched and reared in Mississippi were [released](#) into the Conservancy's Emiquon preserve along the Illinois River this past summer.

The Alligator Gar have [ganoid](#) scales, the strength of which made them ideal for use as arrowheads, armor, shielding for tools, and jewelry by the state's native inhabitants. The many uses to which the fish was put makes this particular reintroduction all the more meaningful, as it's situated immediately west of The Archaeological Conservancy's new Twin Mounds property preserving the remnants of a Native American village, the inhabitants of which more likely than not hunted the Gar in this very wetland.



Ginormous Alligator Gar (*American Museum of Natural History – Wikimedia Commons*)

- ✿ Local sourcing of plant seed is the gold standard in habitat restoration. The locals have adapted over generations to the specific climatic and soil conditions of their home, creating a genotype that can thrive in an area that their cousins growing elsewhere on the continent may find trying. It's kinda like how your relatives who live in southern California visit in February and nearly drive into a ditch whenever so much as a snowflake lands on the road (yes, scientists reading this piece, I know one is a genetic adaptation while the other is behavioral. It's an illustrative example. Give me a break just this once). But what happens later when there's a heat wave in August and temperatures spike like 40 degrees? You can hear 'em laughing at *you* all the way from their Pacific beaches, that's what.

The **Lake County Forest Preserve District** observed that those snowy days may increasingly be replaced by the scorching heat waves in the coming decades, and so posed the obvious question. Are those southern cousins exactly what we need to keep our ecosystems vibrant and healthy? To test the theory, they're running an [experiment](#) on 180 acres of fallow agricultural land in the Grant Woods Forest Preserve – which, incidentally, was newly dedicated last year as an Illinois Nature Preserve and Nature Preserve Buffer. The District has planted a mix of prairie seeds including Little bluestem, Black-eyed Susan, Gray-headed coneflower, Wild bergamot and Purple coneflower from multiple sources; a third of the area was planted with local seeds, the rest with seeds from areas as far south as Kentucky. They'll now monitor the plants to learn how well each group copes as the climate of northern Illinois shifts; the state's climate is expected to be akin to that of Oklahoma within thirty years, and like that of Texas within sixty years.

✿ I spend much of these reports each year discussing impressive preservation and restoration projects. Ensuring that these aren't isolated curiosities, idly glanced at out the window as you drive by is the purpose behind the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's** [Public Amenities and Events](#) (PAE) program, which is now three years old. In 2020 the Foundation awarded 19 grants of up to \$5,500 each. 11 grants have or will be used for amenities including trail extensions, new picnic tables and benches, and interpretive signage on land owned by nonprofit organizations. An additional 8 have or will be used to install amenities, including viewing platforms, interpretive signs, and picnic shelters at government-owned preserves.

✿ Garlic mustard. Sweet clover. Emerald Ash Borer. Justin Bieber. America has had its share of obnoxious imports over the years. **The French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment** and their colleagues have shown that Illinois appears to have seen this opening hand and raised it one horseman of the apocalypse. Beginning in the 1860s an invader to the European continent "...[displaced millions](#), ruined local economies and forced scientists, politicians and ordinary folk into a frenzy of defensive activity". The source of this rending of hair and gnashing of teeth? Phylloxera. That's not



a sexy *Star Trek* space villain; it's a bug. Imported in part from France's former colonial holdings in central Illinois – more specifically from what the map included in the above link suggests would become McLean County or its environs – Phylloxera ate its way through much of Europe's vineyards on a path to global domination that eventually took it to Australia and South Africa. They may have lacked genetic sequencing, but mid-nineteenth century agronomists were no slouches, and quickly identified the pest as a New World import. In response they grafted American vines (that had evolved in tandem with the pest and so could avoid the whole inevitable painful death thing) to the European natives. That solution remains the shield protecting Europe's vineyards from insect-wrought devastation to this very day. (*Photo credit: Beatriz Moisset - Wikimedia Commons*)

✿ Now for a short one that nonetheless needs to be mentioned, because it's important. The Calumet Land Conservation Partnership, established in 2013, is comprised of a group of nine conservation and planning organizations, co-funded by the **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** and ArcelorMittal, whose work is focused on land conservation issues in the Calumet region of Illinois and Indiana.

✿ Many of you who've perused my annual musings over the last few years will recall that out of all the many initiatives run by the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, the [Community Stewardship Challenge](#) grant program is my favorite bar

none. As I've explained in previous editions of this report, the Foundation provides each grantee up to \$21,000 for the stewardship of a project site as a 3:1 match on donations from the organization's supporters. So if the grantee raises \$7k, they'll have \$28,000 to deploy towards the restoration or management of a 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. That's just shy of \$40k to focused, community-driven projects. Last year, the Foundation awarded 14 of these challenge grants – 8 for work on non-profit owned sites, and 6 to nonprofit partners who are working to restore publicly-owned properties. A good number of these sites, incidentally, are featured in these pages or past editions of this report.

- ✿ The super popular and sprawling 1,370-acre Blackwell Forest Preserve in DuPage County - last seen at the start of this section as the location of a stream remeandering and dam removal project – has prairies, wetlands, woodlands and, the pièce de résistance, a [Superfund site](#). A former landfill that operated from 1965-1973, in the early '80s it was discovered that the 1.5 million tons of liquidy nasty stuff were leaking. After careful consideration, this was determined to be a Bad Thing, leading the **Environmental Protection Agency** in 1990 to place the site on the National Priorities List a.k.a. the list of sites that are so contaminated the U.S. Government is going to devote whatever resources are necessary to make them not a death trap. Over the subsequent three decades, the Agency repaired, enhanced, and otherwise remediated the damage at and from the landfill. After thirty years, that process has been successfully concluded, with the former refuse pit being removed from the list much, I should think, to the satisfaction of any and everyone who visits (or lives near...) the Preserve.



Former Blackwell Forest Preserve Superfund Site (U.S. EPA)



Policy & Advocacy

Some *stuff* happened last year that occupied a bit of the government’s attention. This section isn’t entitled “Legislative Odds and Ends” though, which means we’ve got some very neat projects, initiatives and trends to talk about that neither pandemics nor elections can upend. And that’s really the point. It’s the organizations, legislators, businesses, and citizens that – working in tandem or individually – lay the foundations that our future efforts are built upon.

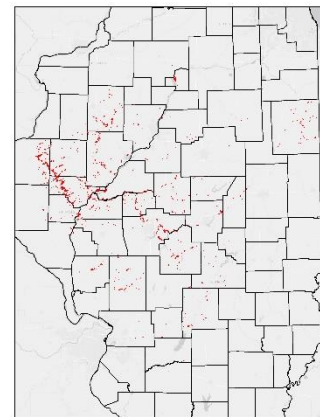


Libertyville Village Hall (*David Holman – cannotsueme LLC*)

- ✿ The Illinois Nature Preserves system is *vast*. 579 distinct sites spread across the state. ~116,460 acres. In the fragmented ecological landscape that is modern Illinois, that land – by definition the highest quality ecological gems in the state – doesn’t and can’t take care of itself. **Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves** has begun filling this longstanding gap. Newly established, the 501(c)3 has a [simple mission](#); to ensure that the state’s Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves maintain their ecological vitality. In their first year, with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and dozens of private supporters, they launched restoration and management projects at seven preserves spread across six counties, are compiling reports from concerned residents on the health, needs, and misuse of preserves throughout the state, and have recruited volunteers to assist in the continued care and management of the preserves they’ve worked at. Not bad for an organization that was only founded in March.

- ✿ The Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship Grant program...isn’t live just yet (there was some sort of disruptive event that struck in March. Our staff researchers are looking into what that might’ve been). *But* although delayed, the Illinois DNR is actively working with the state Commerce Department on the manuals and documents that are legally required in order to stand up the program. So, progress! As a reminder, the competitive program will allow 501(c)3 conservation land trusts to apply for support in the stewarding of dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves, Nature Preserve Buffers, and registered Land & Water Reserves. The Department expects to have details early this year, and to open the program to bids by the dawn of the state’s new fiscal year in July.

✿ Four years ago in this space I discussed the launch of I-View, a web map designed to facilitate inter and intraorganizational conservation planning whose centerpiece is a geodatabase of all publicly and privately protected fee and easement natural lands (and for good measure also municipal parks) in the state. Well, *almost* all of them, as that same announcement noted in a parenthetical that it didn't include the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program ([CREP](#)) easements. That changed last year, thanks to a project between the **Prairie State Conservation Coalition** and some heroically dedicated folks at the **Illinois Department of Natural Resources**. *Full disclosure: I conceived and did the mapping work for this project, so be aware of my potential bias.*



Made possible through the super generous support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, **Ducks Unlimited**, and the **U.S. Endowment for Forestry & Communities**, the project mapped the 86,414 acres of permanent CREP easements in the Illinois and Kaskaskia River watersheds. That sounds like a lot. It should. Because it is. The permanent CREP easements represent a third of all land under easement in the state, and that's assuming that you count the Illinois Nature Preserves as conservation easements. Similarly, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program easements account for 46% of *all* conservation easements across Illinois. Those include 25 easements that closed in 2015 totaling 2,044.1 acres that have been added to the graph that's prominently shown on the first page of the 'Public Sector Land Conservation' section of this report.

The CREP is designed to improve the health of the Illinois and Kaskaskia Rivers, and as such a majority of the easements are found along or near the rivers and their tributaries. This has led to some frankly astounding land protection feats, most notably along the La Moine River in western Illinois. With the addition of these easements, the I-View Protected Lands database is now the *only* complete database of *all* protected natural lands – public and private, fee-owned and easement – in the nation. The newly added easements can be viewed within [I-View](#). Or, if you want the CREP properties called out, you can take a gander at [this](#) one.

✿ The Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation has launched a green burial program in a secluded, scenic corner of their Casper Bluff Preserve previously enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program: the Casper Creek Natural Cemetery. Natural burials (sometimes called green burials) eschew many of the traditional steps in the mortuary process, instead facilitating the body's decomposition and recycling into the environment. Long-time readers know that JDCF is almost without peer in devising and implementing new ways of becoming an integral part of the community, and this new program is no exception to that commendable record. In addition to providing a final resting place for the Foundation's members and others interested in the new trend, the service creates a new revenue stream to support land stewardship on their 1,600 acres of fee-owned natural and cultural lands. The conversations with prospective clients wanting to purchase grave sites also affords an opportunity for the Foundation to discuss planned gifts and bequests from clients' respective estates.

✿ Last year, I described at length an awesome program known as a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCA) to be launched in 2020 that was helmed by the Energy Resource Center at the University of Chicago, working with the USFWS and energy companies as well as state Departments of Transportation across the country that would play a huge role in cooperatively protecting the habitat of the Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). It's time for an update! But first, a quick recap of what the program is and why I'm so enthralled by it. As I wrote a year ago:

“The program ... focuses on the single most extensive and integrated network of natural lands in the state: electricity transmission and distribution lines and roads—or, more specifically, the corridors and rights-of-way on which this infrastructure lies. These corridors ... comprise tens of thousands of acres that connect much of the state. Through this voluntary program, which participating landowners can leave at any time, power providers and highway agencies can adopt specific conservation measures such as reduced mowing and the planting of pollinator species which will provide habitat for the declining monarch butterfly and the effectiveness of which they'll monitor and report to the USFWS.”



Kenneth Dwain Harrelson – Wikimedia Commons

Why join such a program? Because it's the right thing to do, obviously. But also because the USFWS may list the Monarch butterfly on the Endangered Species List – a decision this year means they'll consider such a listing annually until either the species has recovered or it goes onto the list. If this cross-hemispheric migrant is so listed, that would of course require landowners to take various actions to protect the species. Participants in a CCA however are provided a permit containing an assurance that should they engage in the agreed upon conservation activities, they won't be required to implement any additional conservation measures regardless of whether the species is listed. The monarchs get increased, improved, interconnected habitat across vast swaths of the state (that, ideally, can keep the USFWS from having to list them in the first place), and the power companies and highway agencies get policy and regulatory certainty.

A 2017 [paper](#) used by the CCA to determine the amount of habitat required for the Monarchs to maintain a viable population identified a need to provide milkweed – the only plant upon which Monarch caterpillars feed – on [~1.55 million acres](#) of rights-of-way throughout the north central U.S. The program's goal is the enrollment of 2.3 million acres. In just the first year, they secured habitat commitments on 671,618 acres, just over a quarter of that long-term goal. It's an inspiring start to a huge program whose scale dwarfs anything else described in this report.

- ✿ In a separate but related initiative, the Illinois Monarch Project – also led by the University of Illinois – is a statewide initiative that aims to add 150 million new milkweed stems (out of the 1.5 billion needed nationwide as identified by the study cited above) to Illinois over the next eighteen years. Drawing on the experience and expertise of groups and individuals in the agricultural, rights-of-way, urban, and natural lands over six years, the project last year completed an [action plan](#) for meeting this ambitious aim. The plan is broken down into specific goals, objectives & strategies, with action items for each of the four sectors that reflect their individual capabilities and situations.
- ✿ [Multiple](#) coal-fired power stations were retired in 2019, yet I'm embarrassed to admit I'd never followed such news and so failed to discuss in last year's report this frankly huge reduction in CO₂ emissions (and improvement in friggging air quality through the elimination of emissions of mercury...and lead...and SO₂...and NO_X...and PM_{2.5}...and...well, you get the idea). That oversight has been corrected for 2020; I was psyched by the [closure](#) last year of two of the four units at the Dallman power plant in Springfield. Producing 180.4 MW/yr; just under 30% of the plant's coal-fired capacity, their retirement reflects a decade-long shift in the power market caused by plunging prices for natural gas and solar & wind facilities. The closures will save Springfield, which owns the plant, tens of millions annually, as in many locales it's now far cheaper to purchase electricity produced by nuclear, solar, wind, and natural gas facilities from the grid than it is to operate a coal-fired plant.



Seeing the backside of 180 MW/yr in coal-fired CO₂ and toxic emissions was one of the highlights of my year, but you know what beats that? Having *another* 173 MW/yr retired on top of that. In a completely unrelated move, the larger of two units at the Southern Illinois Power Cooperative – Lake of Egypt plant in Marion also [closed](#) permanently last year. Since 2012, coal-fired generating capacity (note I said *capacity*. For a variety of reasons I won't bore you with, plants don't generally run at capacity, and often run well below it) has fallen by over *half*. I chose 2012 as the starting point for this certain-to-be-recurring graph because that was the year in which both the state's newest coal plant came online and several plants were shut down, creating a solid baseline from which I'm really looking forward to watching the total active capacity

move inexorably lower in the years ahead. That's a statement of fact; not hope. A ridiculous number of Illinois' remaining coal plants had retirement dates announced last year, setting the 2020s up to be a decade of rapid change in the state's power generation milieu.

☼ Stormwater is something of an issue in most any urban and a whole lot of suburban locales, for obvious reasons. How that water is dealt with is kinda important, because it's not just a matter of moving the stuff from point A to point B. We produce what might generously be called a fair amount of extraneous *stuff* that's deposited underfoot. Not only trash, but chemicals, heavy metals (always a fun one), and let's not forget the proliferating bacteria that consume a bunch of this stuff. Rather than gathering as much water and all its associated detritus as possible and then shunting it into our streams, rivers, and lakes, green stormwater infrastructure takes the novel approach of replicating some of reducing runoff and treating as much water as possible onsite. The **Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation** made a significant investment into the field last year, funding the development of green stormwater programs and a collaborative green stormwater watershed council in greater Chicagoland.

☼ I'm closing this section with a shoutout to a legislative victory from 2019 that I only learned of last year. The Real Property Conservation Rights Act (a.k.a. the bit of the legislative code that created conservation easements) was [significantly modernized](#) thanks to the efforts of Mr. George Covington, an attorney specializing in conservation easements with *decades* of service to Illinois conservation and whom many reading this report already know to be one of the finest legal minds in conservation today, and the Illinois Environmental Council, which needs no introduction.

Why talk about this legislative accomplishment now? Well, first off 'cause I can. It's my report, so bugger off. Second, because it's really *important*. Illinois was one of the early adopters of conservation easements (here's a factoid that you'll never ever have any occasion to actually use: The first two conservation easements in the state are in Lake and McHenry Counties, respectively), in the late 1970s, and so missed out on a lot of what became best practices. HB2601, linked to above, addressed these inevitable shortcomings. So what'd the bill change?

For starters, it laid out how an easement can be amended. No, you're not alone; I assumed that was part of the original bill too, but nope. The Act now clarifies that an easement can be amended by filing (and *only* by filing) such an amendment with the appropriate County Recorder of Deeds office, that both the landowner and easement holder agree to the amendment – rather important, that – and no amendments that'd adversely impact the existing conservation purposes are permitted.

This next bit I was especially pleased with: all local governments now have the right to convey a conservation right (i.e., an easement) to other units of government or to non-profit organizations or trusts in the land conservation space. For my readers who work in the public sector or are elected leaders in the same, read that last sentence again. This opens up an entirely new tool with which to place another layer of protection over the properties you steward. Alternatively, it can be used to protect for the first time

property that's used for environmental or recreational purposes but that isn't owned by an entity specifically dedicated to conservation. I'm thinking specifically about municipal land. And even more specifically about that wooded trail two miles from my childhood home that my Dad and I bike through three days a week every spring, summer, and fall. Let's start the conversation folks is all I'm sayin'.

We're not quite done with the updated Act yet either. The amendment also makes clear that certain third parties can enforce the terms of an easement against other third parties that are violating the easement's terms (like, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service could take action against someone dumping garbage on an easement property) and gave easement holders the ability to record a notice of violation against a property on which the terms of the easement are being violated.

Rounding things out, the amended Act stipulates that an easement shan't be extinguished by a claim of abandonment, adverse possession, or merger, and that no subsequent prescriptive easement can be established that adversely impacts an existing conservation easement. All in all, a valuable refinement of a venerable piece of legislation that is the legal bedrock upon which so many of the projects described in this report year in and year out rest.



Aforementioned Wooded Trail. Now Featuring Snow (*David Holman*)



Stories from the Field

I'm going with something a bit different this year. Rather than doing a deep dive on some esoteric topic or one of my pet peeves, I invite you to a palette cleanser of some of the best (i.e., funniest) stories from the field I have ever heard.

Jim Johannsen – Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

I want to preface this story with two statements that may seem odd in the context of land conservation, but will make a lot more sense after you read this: (1) Sex trafficking is bad, and (2) Prostitution/sex work is not necessarily bad. That being said, this is the story of how we bought an infamous local landmark.

A few years ago, we bought a small 1-acre residential tract next to our Wapello Preserve because it was an eyesore and we wanted to clean it up. The parcel had an old trailer on it that probably hadn't been moved in 40 years and was in serious disrepair, plus the yard was covered in weeds and all sorts of trash and junk. The property taxes were in delinquency, so the County put it up for auction and JDCF bought it for \$1000 at auction. We hauled away the old trailer, cleaned up all the trash, and cleared all the invasive brush and weeds.

At some point in the process, one of our older Board Members made us aware that the trailer in question had a storied past. When I was describing where the property was located, this Board Member replied, "Oh, you mean the cat house?"

I've since learned that "cat house" is an older term for "brothel." The contractor that we hired to tear down the old trailer corroborated the story from our Board Member. According to these old-timers, the young women who frequented this trailer often entertained the young men working at the nearby Savanna Army Depot.

So that's the story of how JDCF accidentally bought a former brothel and turned it into a picnic area.

I really enjoyed this next one because it's like disaster bingo. I honestly don't think anyone else can come anywhere close to what Great Rivers Land Trust has dealt with at this **one** site.

Alley Ringhausen – Great Rivers Land Trust

Great Rivers Land Trust acquired Piassa Harbor, a rundown boat marina on the Mississippi River in 2009. It had numerous structures, a gas station, boat marina, and 50 years of accumulated junk. Since acquiring the property Great Rivers has demolished six large buildings, eliminated the gas station, remediated said gas station's underground storage tanks, created a Riverfront Park that is publicly accessible, and hosted events that have attracted thousands of people to the site.

So despite the extra work, it's been a worthwhile addition. But... But. In the decade since we purchased the property, we've experienced historic flooding of the Mississippi River which inundated the site multiple times. We've been hit by not one but two tornadoes, (one in 2013 and another in 2017). We have had a fire, two burglaries, a DEA drug sting that resulted in a high-speed chase, an accidental death, a motorcycle crash, two sunken boats, a shooting, and a death threat that resulted in an order of protection. During that time we've also been inspected routinely by seven different government agencies... We are still having fun.

Everyone working in the natural lands space has plenty of experience with weeds. And so I thought it appropriate to close with one of my favorite stories of the year – this one about **the** Weed.

Lisa Haderlein – The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

In 2008, a pot farm was raided on a property adjacent to TLC's Wicker Conservation Easement. Helicopters, crime scene tape, big newspaper article, and every pot plant was ripped out of the ground.

It was a big deal.

Just so happens that TLC had been trying to purchase this property since 2006, as it includes 43 acres of the largest remnant oak woods in McHenry County.

Fast forward 12 years to June 15, 2020, and TLC finally succeeds in buying the property, now called Crowley Road Oaks. While surveying the property a few months later, guess what TLC's stewardship staff finds? A pot farm with about 200 plants, not quite ready for harvest.

The find is reported to the Sheriff. A Deputy takes down all of the information and says he'll get back to us. That's the last we hear. We leave messages, send emails, but no response. We figure maybe they have the site under observation.

Early December, staff visit the property to see what happened. And, well, nothing happened. All of the plants are still standing - dead, but still there. The only thing missing is a hi-tech trail cam that the growers used to keep an eye on the farm.

In case anyone is wondering, the crop was ruined by the cold.



2019 Revisited

With one notable organizational exception, I came *so close* in last year's report to discussing each and every one of the land acquisition projects that came to fruition over the course of 2019. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades though, so as 2021 dawns, join me in a final look at 2019.

✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

I haven't a clue as to how I missed this 8.52 acres as an addition to the 2,750.8-acre Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve. Consider me embarrassed. Located to the northeast of the main body of the Preserve in the southeastern corner of the County adjacent to the City of Darien, Sawmill Creek flows through the north of the site from west to east, shortly thereafter reentering the Preserve prior to emptying into the Des Plaines River. The creek is part of a larger hydrological system at the Preserve that provides ideal habitat for the state endangered Hines Emerald Dragonfly. The District has spent well over \$1M in restoration work on the site over the last several decades to further support this rare insect, and the expansion of the Preserve is a welcome boon to those efforts.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

This one really, really annoyed me. So, last year I had an objectively awesome description written for the FPDKC's last project of the decade; a combination fee acquisition and conservation easement in the northern portion of the County as an addition to the Freeman-Kame Meagher Forest Preserve. Sadly, the easement was either abandoned or didn't close by the end of the calendar year, so I had to go rework the project description. *But then.* But then, on the last day of January, a newly recorded 0.523-acre conservation easement appeared in the annals of the good County of Kane. It was the missing conservation easement – *neither* abandoned nor delayed – and which had been signed on December 4th the previous year! ☺ The easement encumbers a small portion of the larger wetland that the District acquired, and was protected via easement rather than being included with the fee acquisition due to zoning requirements.



My description of the fee-owned property last year which I quote below has the benefit of putting the easement in context and offers the added advantage of my not having to pen anything new. As I wrote in 2019, the larger project contains 'a small piece of a

large woodland that covers much of the southwestern portion of the preserve is found in the southwest of the property, bordering a wetland that covers the balance of the site. The wetland is at the northern extent of a larger complex that extends southeast into the Preserve. Its acquisition will improve the District's ability to manage the wetland complex as a coherent whole, as water from the adjacent residential community flows into the low-lying property.'

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

The problem with national programs is that, thanks to the marvels of bureaucracy it sometimes takes a *loong* time for projects from the states to wend their way to D.C. and from there out to the public. Such is the situation at the NRCS, where in the opening months of the year just past the folks in D.C. got around to adding to their public database *a few* lingering Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) that had closed over the course of 2019. And by "a few" I of course mean 80% of them, making 2019 the most productive year for the program since 200-frigging-5.

That gives us an impressive 17 additional projects from 2019 scattered across 10 counties. Don't want to read another dozen and a half project descriptions before declaring victory and filing this report away? Well, [good news everyone!](#) I don't want to *write* another dozen and a half project descriptions that most of y'all would probably skip anyhow. So, I'm going to try something new, exciting, and scary in equal measure; [summarizing!](#) (that video works for so very many occasions). As with the majority of ACEP-WRE easements, most of the properties contain a mix of agricultural fields, woodland, and wetland. All but one of the new easements are permanent, while the last, a 26-acre property in White County, will last for 30 years. A second 77.7-acre easement in White County rounds out this southeastern bastion of the state. There were also another 5 easements in Alexander County totaling 526.7 acres, 3 in Clark County coming in at 525.2 acres, two in Union at 297.5 acres, and one each in six counties; 86.9 acres in Crawford, 69.2 acres in Greene, 71 acres in Jasper, 32.7 acres in Lawrence, 58.5 acres in Pope, and 77.6 acres in Rock Island. There. That was relatively painless, eh?

✿ **And One More Thing**

Readers with excellent memories or future grad students slogging through a bunch of these annual missives in rapid succession for a research project will notice that the private sector land protected numbers for 2015 and 2017 both went up by several hundred acres on the historical graph in this year's report. That's because on a whim I checked some Recorder of Deeds databases in the service area of the Sangamon Conservancy Trust, which protects agricultural land, and discovered to my shock that after many years of quiescence they had a burst of activity in the middle of the last decade that I'd completely missed. The four new, I mean old, I mean, um, you know what I'm trying to say...easements are found in Sangamon, Logan, Christian, and Menard Counties.



Changes at the Top

With dozens of public and nonprofit organizations working around the state, there've always been, ever since I started writing this report, several changes in leadership over the course of a year. Something about 2020 was different, leading to a pause in the normal ebb and flow of things. Can't *quite* put my finger on what it was...Anyhow, the long and short of it is that there was just one big personnel change this year!

Jolie Krasinski has begun the next phase of her career, having served for over a decade at the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**. Over the last five years as the Natural Areas Program Director, she led a *major* expansion in the range of said programming, the types of organizations supported, and the Foundation's geographic reach. As readers probably know on account of I describe most of 'em in the pages above, today there are seven different grant programs, with projects being implemented by organizations large and small throughout the state. By my own count (and I'm sure I'm missing some), the Foundation now makes over 80 grants a year across the conservation sector.

From the Community Stewardship Challenge Grants that I extol in this space each year, to the K-12 Pollinator Program, to land acquisition and so very much more, Jolie's work has shaped the world just about everyone reading this report lives in. She has an unusual combination of vision and knowledge that led directly to some of the most significant projects of our time. To pick just a few, through her guidance the Foundation has supported the Kishwaukee River land protection initiative spanning three counties and numerous public and private partners, the growth of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge from mere wild idea to rapidly expanding reality, the creation of a vibrant new land trust, and, on both a personal and professional note, the Illinois Protected Natural Lands Database and I-View mapping application. The legacies of her vision and dedication are as deep as they are broad – she's unquestionably part of the pantheon of Illinois conservation greats!

And we are *done*. Thanks for joining me in a review of what by any measure was an eventful twelve months. 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.