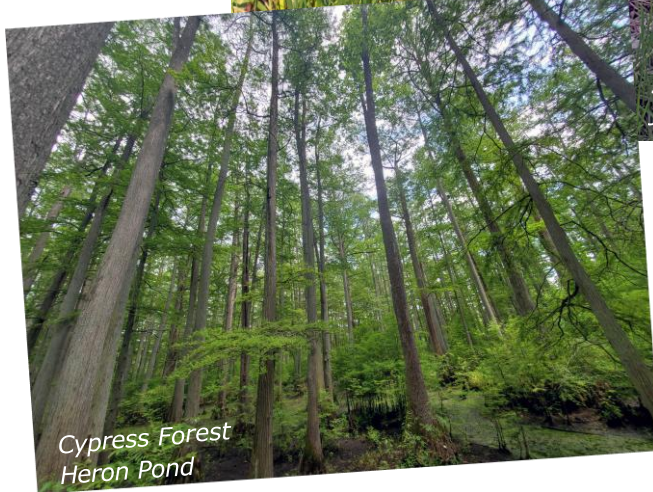




2024 Year In Review

Annual Report of Land Conservation & Policy Achievements in Illinois



Photos by Cynthia Kanner

About Prairie State Conservation Coalition

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

PSCC provides networking opportunities such as the annual Land Conservation Conference and now regional conferences, educational webinars, and resources for conservation land trusts and agencies. They advocate for strong statewide policies that benefit land conservation and the work of conservation groups throughout Illinois. The Coalition hired its first Executive Director in 2023, and has recently been joined by two additional full time staff members managing its grant program.

Find out more at prairiestateconservation.org.

Our Mission: To unite and strengthen the land and water conservation community throughout the State of Illinois. The statewide conservation community includes conservation land trusts, local and state conservation agencies, and other public and private organizations where land and watershed conservation are part of their mission.

Our Vision:

The vision of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition is to foster and lead a diverse, statewide conservation community that:

- Understands the pivotal role land preservation and stewardship plays in mitigating the effects of climate change and its impact to the natural landscape and its inhabitants
- Possesses the skills, capacity, connections, and energy to adapt preservation strategies to protect and steward Illinois' valuable biodiversity and natural resources
- Embraces diversity, justice, equity, inclusion, and accessibility at all levels as critical principles for success and connecting people to the land.

Author bio:

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2024 – Year in Review

Some see the new year as a time of beginnings, others as one for calm reflection. For *me*, however, it's an opportunity to regale you, dear readers, with tales of conservation derring-do from the year just past. That and time to start working on my taxes. The former hopefully being a bit more engaging than the latter, I invite you to join me on this wild and crazy look back at 2024 which, spoiler alert, was with 8,463.5 newly protected acres of natural lands the single most productive year in the decade that I've been writing these things. Enjoy dozens of pages of me rambling semi-coherently, but want even more? Well, great news; all of the reports from 2019-'23 are [available](#) for your discerning perusal.

This annual compendium is again coming to you in coordination with the Prairie State Conservation Coalition. If you're not familiar with the organization, scroll back up a page for an excellent summary of their work. As I've said before, it's the support and resources the group brings to bear that helps its members achieve the successes I get to write about in this report. Remember, all opinions, commentary, and asides in said report are mine alone, and don't necessarily reflect those of either PSCC or its members.

With that out of the way, welcome readers old and new to *2024 Year in Review*. What are we reviewing you might ask? As always, a little bit of everything. Over the next 60-odd pages, we'll be taking a look at:

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Flint Creek Savanna (*Cynthia Kanner*)

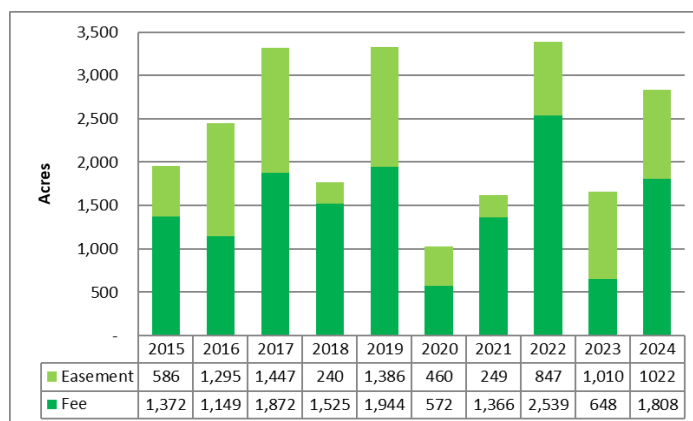


Bison on the move (*Matt Ruhter*)

Private Sector Land Conservation

To call Illinois' conservation land trusts irreplaceable is to understate the matter. Some are hyper local. Others operate at large scales, establishing expansive, rolling natural refuges, sometimes independently, sometimes as essential partners with public institutions. Still others have incubated some of the most ambitious conservation initiatives of our era, from restoring vast floodplain wetlands to returning bison to the state's landscape after more than a century's absence. All of these projects begin with land preservation, and the land trust community did not disappoint on that score last year, collectively protecting 2,829.1 acres across the state.

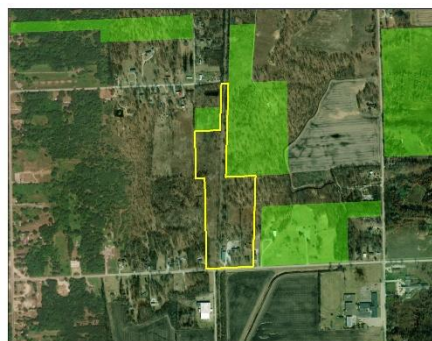
This report is long enough already, so let's get the annual reminder of how those numbers on that graph you're looking at are derived out of the way so we can get started. Over the coming pages, I discuss every land protection project that closed over the past year, but only include newly protected sites in the acreage totals; otherwise we'd be double counting, and no one wants that. If a previously protected property is transferred from one organization to another, or a new layer of protection placed over a property that had already been preserved via some other tool, it's thus not included in the graph. OK, that's it, so let's get started!



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

✿ Community Development Corporation of Pembroke Hopkins Park

1) Protecting a black oak sand savanna is one reason for excitement. Establishing a permanent home for a successful and growing community organization that both preserves the legacy and works to build the future of a historically marginalized community is another. Doing both at the same time? Well, that's just awesome. And that's exactly what happened at this 29.1-acre property in southern Kankakee Township, acquired with the support of the *Illinois Audubon Society* and the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*.



The black oak sand savanna is quite the unusual beast. Mostly destroyed in the early years of Euro-American settlement, Kankakee Sands is the single largest remaining example of this elusive ecological community not merely in the state, but the country. Its preservation and restoration is a cooperative venture involving multiple groups and individuals, as demonstrated by the fact that the property is directly adjacent to land owned by CDCPHP (as it happens detailed in last year's annual report) and The Nature Conservancy – with all three sites scheduled for registration as an Illinois Land & Water Reserve – while lying no more than a quarter mile from additional conservation lands owned by partner organizations and a private conservationist and nearly next door to a public park.

A building on the southern end of the site will be converted into a visitor center along with office space and meeting facilities, providing not just a base of operations, but a destination for residents and visitors alike who seek to explore this rarest of ecological communities.

✿ Friends of the Kankakee

2) We're back with one of my favorite projects in the state; the building – often one ¼ acre parcel at a time – of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area in northeastern Iroquois County. The existing ~66 acre Refuge was acquired by Friends of the Kankakee and deeded to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2016. That however was only a small piece of the wider objective: to link together protected natural lands to the west, north, and east, with the latter lying across the state line in Indiana. It's to do so that Friends of the Kankakee has for nearly three decades been stitching together a mature black oak savanna that long ago was subdivided into a largely unbuilt residential development. The acquisition last year of four lots totaling 1.8 acres brings the organization's cumulative land protected in the wider area to 344 acres and that dream yet another step closer to being realized.



3) ...And we're not done yet either. In a development so unexpected that upon learning of it I presumed some algorithm had screwed up and was spitting out bad property ownership data, Friends clearly decided that when you have the word "Kankakee" in your name it'd be a crime not to be working in the watershed of the same name, leading to the purchase of 3.6 acres near their namesake river. Adjacent to a conservation easement held by the Illinois DNR and part of the larger Mokenzee Wetlands State Natural Area and acquired with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the acquisition is the beginning of what the organization hopes will develop into a meaningful contribution to the preservation and restoration of this historic wetland community.



✿ Great Rivers Land Trust

4) For the third year running, I begin my review of Great Rivers' almost invariably prolific accomplishments by talking about bats. More specifically, the federally endangered Indiana and Northern Long-eared varieties. Like most endangered critters, habitat loss is a significant aggravating factor leading to that downer of a designation, such that habitat *restoration* is of more than a little importance in stemming – let alone reversing – the decline.



That's where mitigation comes in. When habitat for our winged mammalian cousins is converted to other uses, the converter needs to address the loss. They often do so through the purchase of mitigation credits, secured through the enhancement or expansion of said habitat elsewhere within the species' respective ranges. GRLT has for a fair number of years now partnered with a markedly effective mitigation company that specializes in such work, restoring properties under the eye of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and placing the land in a conservation easement held by a local partner...a



partner like the Great Rivers Land Trust. This time out, we're in eastern Adams County, with 294.8 acres of wooded goodness about four miles from the project discussed in last year's report, and a bit over a mile southwest of Siloam Springs State Park. Oh, complete non sequitur; I wrote the legal description that created that sinuous, constantly curving boundary. By choice. Like, GRLT and their partner were perfectly happy to use straight lines, but no. *I* had to go and decide that the easement needed to take in the entire woodland. Because I am a crazy person. The next time I moan about the size of my inbox, I invite you, my readers to remind me that I bring it on myself by slapping me upside the head with this project. (Photo credit: Alley Ringhausen)

5) On the subject of bats...and Siloam Springs...and for that matter eastern Adams County, we turn next to *another* mitigation project over which Great Rivers has accepted a conservation easement, this one three miles north of the state park. As with its neighbor to the south, the 76.3-acre easement protects restored forest habitat for the aforementioned endangered bats. And, lest you think I'm using the word 'habitat' in the "Oh, totally. This land could definitely support [animal you care about] if it were here. I mean, it's not, but if it was, yeah, it'd be a happy critter" way that it's so often deployed when writing a grant request, no. *This* property – similarly restored by the aforementioned mitigation company and overseen by the USFWS – provides not only feeding grounds, but hosts a longstanding hibernaculum where the bats shelter through the dark winter months. (Photo credit: Alley Ringhausen)



✿ HeartLands Conservancy

6) I'm not going to bury the lede (and yes, that *is* how the word is spelled); the 13.7-acre Trout Hill Prairie in rural Monroe County is *unquestionably* one of the most important, meaningful land protection projects of the year.

Anyone reading this report can quote chapter and verse the statistics on the amount of remnant prairie that has survived plough and excavator. What you might not be so familiar with are the varying types of prairie communities, some of which make their brethren look positively prolific by compare. Such is the case with hill prairies. Formed on dry, southwest facing hill tops overlooking riverine floodplains, depending on who you ask there are somewhere between 530 and 600 acres of such land that remain across the state. And thanks to Heartlands, this site will forever be counted among them.

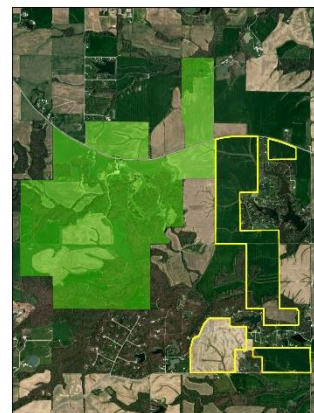


Although the aerial photo makes it look largely wooded, a solid two acres of the site is in fact an open grassland on, yes, a steep southwest facing hilltop and bluff. When the property came onto the market, the land trust turned to the local community for help –



and did they ever. Marshalling support from people across 43 states and four other countries, the Conservancy raised the funds needed to purchase this ecological treasure, which will be both restored (a process which has already begun with removal of some of those cedars that are so prominent on the photo) and opened to the public – the same public that made its preservation possible. (Photo credit: HeartLands Conservancy)

7) For many, conservation is all about protecting our heritage; natural, historic, scenic, agricultural, you name it. It's those last two that are the focus of a trio of easements in Monroe County, established in partnership with a landowner seeking to preserve the land's agricultural legacy. The largest takes in 421.2 acres on the eastern side of the county, south of IL-156. Nearly half of these fecund fields are underlain by prime agricultural soils as identified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. What makes the project *really* notable though is *another* trio of easements held by HeartLands bordering the land to the west. Established in 2014, the neighboring properties take in just over 1,000 acres of farmland and forest, meaning we're looking at nearly 1,500 acres of privately protected field and forest; that's a bloody impressive number no matter how you look at it.



Checking the fields (*HeartLands Conservancy*)

8-9) The second of the three easements has us moving from east to west; *really* west in fact, to the floodplain of the Mississippi at the edge of the bluffs overlooking the mighty river. Bisected by a rail line, these 83 acres drew my attention for a reason that has nothing whatsoever to do with agriculture; they're very nearly adjacent to a complex of forest and glade, prairie and cliff owned and restored by Clifftop – a local land trust whose work, like that of HeartLands, has been much discussed in these pages. The work of the two organizations here is complementary both geographically and functionally, with the long-term possibilities legitimately exciting my interest. Rounding things out, the final easement is similarly sized at 85.9 acres, and similarly located, situated on the wide floodplain about four miles south of its compatriot.



✿ Illinois Audubon Society

10) There might well be nothing more fundamental to a healthy grassland ecosystem than scale. Without it, even the most vibrant of prairies will be limited in the wildlife they can support while, depending on the neighbors, pesticide and herbicide drift can do quite a number on the local flora. That is not revelatory information to literally anyone reading this report, but it bears comment here because no one understands this fact quite like those who have assumed responsibility for managing Illinois' scattered grassland resources.



Loy Prairie in northeastern Marion County is a textbook example of just such a site. A tad under 300 acres, this registered Land and Water Reserve is also the northern outpost of the Illinois DNR's Prairie Ridge-Marion State Natural Area. So when the property's manager learned that a farm adjacent to the property was going to the (online) auction block, he both knew what had to be done and who to call.

With little time until the event, IAS swung into action, ultimately submitting the winning bid for this 106.75-acre parcel that will be restored to grassland before eventually being sold to the IDNR for incorporation both into Loy Prairie (which IAS *also* purchased and later sold to the state) and, more broadly, into the growing regional preserve. The newly christened Joy Prairie is named in honor of a former board member of the Society. Involved in the early days of the effort to save the prairie chicken – one of the grassland birds that this project exists to support – the funds for the acquisition came from a bequest made by Ms. Joy, and I for one can think of no better way to honor such a woman.



Miss Margery monitoring the auction after making the winning bid. (IAS)

11) A couple years back I regaled you, my readers with the tale of what has since been dubbed the Queen of the Prairie unit of the Green River Lowlands Preserve in Lee County, southwest of the City of Amboy. Identified as the highest priority for protection in a county not short of ecological gems, this mix of wetland, sedge meadow, open fields and bur oak woodlands has leveled up with the addition of 58.5 acres of woodlands and agricultural fields. Now, of those two features, you might understandably think the focus is going to be the former, but nope, it's the latter. The land immediately to the north of the new property is similarly open, such that it promises a substantially larger grassland area once both north and south have been restored – something that, you will not be surprised to learn, is near the top of the to-do list, with the land being allowed to grow freely for a few years to see what's in the seedbank, helped along by a healthy prescribed burn regimen.



Oh, also, it's something of a tangent, but keep reading this report or, if you're lazy and/or pressed for time do a keyword search to learn of another *really* impressive project that, while they didn't acquire it themselves, IAS played a key supporting role in bringing to fruition last year. This is one heck of an organization, and one of the few that consistently and impressively works from one end of the state to the other.

✿ **Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation**

12) It's a rare treat in these pages to have a project that mixes Native American cultural heritage and high-quality prairie. Add in nearly a mile of unchannelized stream, and we've got *quite* the engaging site with something for just about everyone – which may be why this was very much a collaborative effort, with support from *The Conservation Fund* and, through them, the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and the NRCS' Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Anyhow, this is the part where you might expect me to talk about “the highlight” of the property, but that's just not possible here, because it's equally impressive across multiple levels.



That being the case, let's start with the archaeological piece. JDCF has a long and distinguished track record preserving and promoting the cultural legacy of the county's Native peoples; a focus that's exemplified by the prominent, linear mound that extends for well over 100 feet through the forests of this 119.6-acre conservation easement. Constructed in the Late Woodland period (circa 500-1000 C.E.), the monument – ironically given both its present surroundings and name of the era in which it was erected – was likely raised on open prairie or savanna. It's that very grassland that

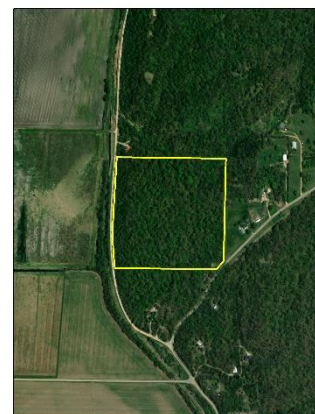


hangs on across the property, in the form of multiple remnant dolomite hill prairies dotting the hills that undulate across the site.

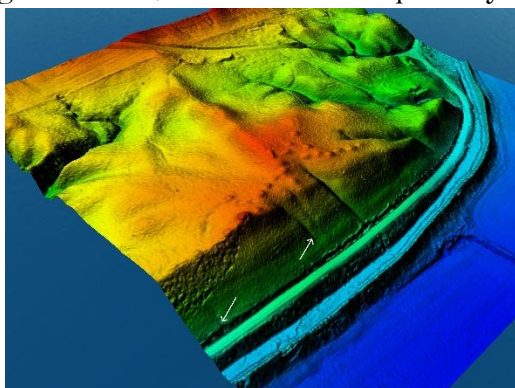
In the valleys between those hills run three separate waterways, the most notable of which is the twisting and turning Hughlett's Branch – a tributary of the Galena River which in turn shortly thereafter flows into the Mississippi. Wetlands and forest line the shores of each, punctuated by the occasional old field. Taken individually each element of the property is worthy of praise, while taken collectively it really is something special. (Photos: Dolomite hill prairie and proud landowners. Credit: Jim Johannson)



13) There's an old joke that a subdivision is named after the natural features paved over by said subdivision. The 39.8-acre Mounds of the Lost Lake does a 180° spin on that one, comprehensively describing what has instead been permanently *protected* by this tantalizing new preserve. Continuing with the theme begun in the previous piece, this high quality mesic upland forest on undulating hilly terrain overlooking a large plain in southwestern Carroll County houses 23 mounds constructed in the Middle to Late Woodland period (circa 200-1000 C.E.).



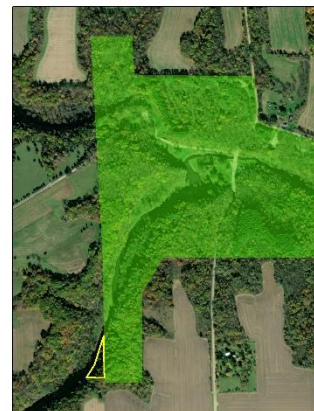
It's easy to overlook, but that aforementioned plain is the source of the second element of the site's mellifluous name. Wetlands – as any reading this know – were not exactly looked upon with favor by prior generations. Such was the case in Jo Daviess County where, in 1871, Sunfish Lake was drained by the county government, at the cost of the princely sum of \$6,600 (about \$170K today which, I



admit, does seem pretty cheap), giving rise to the agricultural plain that now stretches out before this hilly enclave. As a final note, that multifaceted historical legacy is the reason this site has the distinction of being the only conservation property in the state (at least that I'm aware of) to be co-owned, as *The Archaeological Conservancy* has joined JDCF in taking ownership of and responsibility for the land.

The mounds pop off the page when viewed on a Lidar image of the site.
(Don Luman)

14) What can I say about this 1.045-acre tract nestled between Apple River Canyon State Park and the river of the same name? No, seriously; that was my burning question upon learning of this unusual and unusually small project. OK! You'd be justified in guessing that the land was purchased to facilitate management of the State Park; that's certainly what I assumed. Justified, but wrong. Until recently, it was believed that the state land encompassed a large geological feature nestled along the east side of the river. Turns out, not so much; the impressive limestone edifice lies a bit beyond the park's boundary.



The recently acquired parcel is (or rather, was) part of a centennial farm, the rest of which is located on the *other* side of the river, making the tract extraneous to the farming operation, but a natural fit for the conservation set. And so the deal was done. And now for the kicker. A few weeks before closing, a survey of the parcel revealed that the rock that started this whole thing is actually on another parcel altogether a few dozen feet to the south. It's all good though, as the property really is a natural extension of the state park, to which it will eventually be added.

✿ Lake Forest Open Lands Association

15) While we're on the subject of lands carved by flowing water, the Jean & John Greene Nature Preserve is arguably one of LFOLA's premier sites, the centerpiece of which are three super rare lakeshore ravines. Adjacent to the Lake County Forest Preserve District's Fort Sheridan to the south, this 60.2-acre fully restored wooded ecosystem is shared between the land trust and their namesake municipality. A 0.8-acre parcel on the west side of the preserve was deeded from the latter to the former – so, no change in protection status, just ownership. I note it here in part out of an interest in this report being a comprehensive compendium of all of 2024's land protection projects and in significantly larger part because you know it would just gnaw at me for like the next three years if I failed to mention it.



The addition on a crisp fall day (LFOLA)

16) Of significantly greater interest is what has astutely been described as one of the few remaining “unprotected crown jewels on the Middlefork.” The area’s namesake black soil savanna is the big draw here, representing what those smarter and more knowledgeable than I have identified as the highest quality savanna of its type in the *nation*, but it also takes in mature woodland and an assortment of prairies and wetlands. It’s largely the first two that are on display at this 28.6-acre property that the Association has been eyeing for four decades – evidence if any was needed that they’re serious in calling this a crown jewel.



The property abuts the Middlefork Savanna Forest Preserve to the west and easements held by the Lake County Forest Preserve District and LFOLA to the north. It’s also, as



Woodland and prairie in fine form (LFOLA)

it happens, subject to an easement itself; the western two acres that parallel the area’s namesake waterway having been previously protected by the Forest Preserve District in another sign of how integral the site is within a wider protected ecosystem that’s spread across over 750 acres of publicly and privately protected land. It’s a welcome addition to a special place that I for one enjoy regularly visiting*.

* By which I of course mean admiring it out the window of the commuter train to Chicago.

17) Circling back to those lakeshore ravines, we come to a bluff and slope overlooking exactly that. The unquestioned highlight of this 2.13-acre easement is a mature, healthy forest with over half a dozen herbaceous understory species that have coefficient of conservatism values of 8 or more. Most of my readers will be well aware of what that means, but for anyone who hasn’t yet delved into the wonderfully esoteric world of [floristic quality assessment](#), anything with a value of 8 or higher on this ten point scale is representative of a highly specialized species of flora able to thrive only in undisturbed, healthy ecosystems. Those with C-Values of 10 – of which this property has two – are for all intents and purposes completely restricted to such natural areas. The woodland pairs with a small prairie in the process of being restored to provide bird habitat directly adjacent to the major migratory highway that is Lake Michigan. This is one of those sites where the raw acreage number can’t do justice to the ecological value of the land itself.



✿ Land Conservation Foundation

18) A few years back I regaled you, my dear readers, with the creation of a humble little site in Vermilion County situated at the mouth of Jordan Creek as it flows into the Salt Fork River, appropriately named the Mouth of Jordan Reserve.

As I wrote at the time and am repeating here because of course I'm going to reuse my old work whenever possible do you have any idea how long this thing takes to write these two waterways are of such quality that both have been added to the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, epitomized by a registered Land and Water Reserve and a University of Illinois-owned forest research site less than two miles upstream. Clearly not content with being the small fry amongst this trio, the Foundation definitively mixed things up through the acquisition of a 12-



Jordan Creek, just west of the new addition
(Melissa Records)

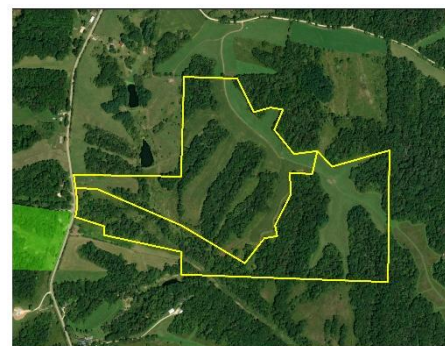
acre upland addition that more than doubles the preserve's size. The wooded tract is positioned on a high bluff that both overlooks and thus buffers the nearby river, and is itself cut through with several quality ravines. It's a fine addition to a fine site, such that it's easy to see why quite a number of folks came together to make it happen.

✿ Natural Land Institute

19) Just about three quarters of Illinois is under agricultural production. There's thus no risk that either corn or cattle will disappear from our landscape. However, what's true in the macro needn't be so in the micro, and it's for precisely that reason that, back in 2001, a farsighted landowner placed 80 acres of farmland and forest found just south of the state line and west of Beloit into a conservation easement that eventually came to be held by the Winnebago County Soil & Water Conservation District. Turns out that was but a prelude, as last year they worked with NLI and, via the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the NRCS to place another easement over an additional and adjacent 27.2 acres of hay and naturalized pasture. This sort of project isn't often a solo operation, and that certainly held true here; the easement was made possible through the support of *The Conservation Fund* and its partnerships with *the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and the aforementioned RCPP.



20-21) While we're on the subject of agricultural conservation easements, let's take a look at...another agricultural conservation easement. Two in fact, owned respectively by siblings who share a conservation ethos. This time we're in western Carroll County, not far from Mississippi Palisades State Park. Hay fields cover much of the eastern reaches of the two properties, with grazing along the western side of each, both of which are also bisected by a tributary of the nearby Camp Creek. Agriculture is complemented by land that has been restored to habitat for



pollinating insects and other fields that have been left to nature, and rounded out by steeply wooded ravines that stand vigil over the fields below. As with their neighbor to the north, both easements – coming in at a combined 154.3 net acres – were made possible through the support of ***The Conservation Fund***, working in tandem with the RCPP and the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***.

Getting back to the land itself, I don't know what about this project excites the Powers That Be, but *I* for one was most interested and enthused by that woodland or, more specifically, plans for the same. Restoration is more often associated with fee-owned preserves than with conservation easements, but here the landowner is actively undertaking restoration of the forest, in this case the removal of invasive shrubs and nonnative trees. So, that's neat, I would say.

(Photo credit: NLI)

22) Speaking of restoration and management of land protected by a conservation easement, I give you land previously protected by a conservation easement – specifically an easement held – as opposed to simply funded – by the Natural Resources Conservation Service under the Wetland Reserve Program. Straddling the Illinois/Wisconsin state line west of Beloit and Rockton, the 326.8-acre Jerry and Kathy Busse Prairie Preserve on Raccoon Creek (196.5 acres of which are in Illinois...of which 7.9 acres *of that* weren't encumbered under the preexisting easement) is one of my personal favorites for the year, because this one has something for just about everyone. Let's start with its namesake creek. A few years ago I wrote about a major addition to another NLI site only a few hundred feet to the south of this new preserve, noting that it preserved a mile and a half of the meandering, un-channelized waterway. To that is now added another solid mile. What's so valuable about natural water flow? Well, that gets into our next point.



See, what *I* like most about this property are its unimpeachable credentials. Most reading this report can likely rattle off near innumerable preserves and projects that ostensibly provide habitat for varied critters, often of the threatened or endangered variety. Thing is, a lot of times that's more theoretical than actual. There are quite a few factors that go into determining whether a species ultimately utilizes – let alone thrives at – a particular site. Whatever those might be, Busse Prairie has them in spades, because it's home to at least three threatened or endangered species including Blanding's Turtles (state endangered), the Rusty Patched Bumble Bee, and the Hine's Emerald Dragonfly (both of which are *federally* endangered). Two of those, you'll observe, are aquatic or semi-aquatic species. See above for my thoughts on the virtues of natural, healthy waterways.



Busse Prairie in all its glory (*Alan Branhagan*)

The very fact that the preserve exists is a testament to the reputation NLI has built among its supporters and the passion its mission inspires. *Over half* of the acquisition cost was donated by a local couple in whose honor it is now named. Much of the balance was donated by similarly generous supporters whose contributions not only helped pay for the land's purchase but are also funding its further restoration and the opening of this remarkable property to the public. This is just a great site and a great project on so very many levels.

23-24) Sticking with Winnebago County, we next turn to two projects only a mile outside the village of Pecatonica, both encompassing portions of a tributary to the river of the same name; one the head, the other the mouth. This spring-fed creek begins in an open plain immediately north of what *was* NLI's 80-acre Pecatonica Ridge Prairie. Why the past tense? Because it's now the 160-acre Pecatonica Ridge Prairie. The name notwithstanding, the new addition was historically largely a sedge meadow and fen, though this was complemented by a small prairie in the far northeast that's more recently been subject to colonization by various woody intruders. Both up and lowlands will be restored to their



native vegetative communities, providing additional habitat to the multitudes of grassland birds already thriving on the wide-open spaces afforded by this mix of prairie and wetland.

What began in an open meadow ends in a floodplain forest; part of a 128.4 acre as yet unnamed preserve that as an added bonus also takes in nearly a mile of the Pecatonica River itself. Oxbows marking the river's former paths are scattered across the land, wetlands having grown up around them. These transition to forested swamp that in turn give way to open field. Continuing with the Pecatonica as the organizing feature and *raison d'être* of the site, the land just so happens to lie across the river from several properties owned by the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County, and immediately downstream from another equally extensive complex of properties owned respectively by the Forest Preserves and the Institute – extending and complimenting an already impressive stretch of protected riverine habitat.

✿ ParkLands Foundation

25) It's easy in this business to be distracted by the latest bright, shiny object; that unexpected parcel that needs protecting or trend that needs chasing. That...has never been a problem for ParkLands which, for over fifty years has been almost singularly focused on a simple yet ambitious goal; the protection and restoration of the Mackinaw River corridor. And that's exactly what we get with this 39.21-acre conservation easement about a mile off of said river in central Woodford County.



Coming to you in part courtesy of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*



as well as...wait for it... *The Conservation Fund* and its work with the NRCS' Regional Conservation Partnership Program (I know, right? I only had occasion to introduce this collaboration last year. That is some impressive scaling ladies and gents) this combination of reforested woodland and restored prairie, wetland and creek – the latter of which drains to the aforementioned river – is located just to the south of ParkLands' several hundred acre Chiquapin Bluffs preserve alongside a separate, publicly held conservation easement. Oh, and did I mention that the Bluffs are also a registered Illinois Land & Water Reserve? Because yeah, they are. This one is unquestionably money well spent.

The easement at sunset. I can not take photos like this.

(Mary Jo Adams)

26) Sticking with the Mackinaw River but moving one county and about 15 miles upstream, we come to the Mohr Preserve; one of a string of such natural refuges along the river west of the nearby City of Lexington. Forests of both the up and bottomland variety have long shared the site with open fields. It's that latter feature that's the focus of a generous donation finalized in the closing days of the year. Once devoted to agriculture, the 16.3-acre parcel was transformed into a haven for pollinating insects following its enrollment last decade in the Conservation Reserve Program. Wishing to see the land protected not merely for the limited duration of the government program but for all time, the owner partnered with ParkLands to see the property transformed once more; this time into an integral piece of the now 294.6-acre Preserve.



✿ The Conservation Foundation

27) Right. I don't mention names very often in this thing, such that when I do it's worth taking note. The Hamill family has, quite possibly, had a greater impact on conservation across the state than has any other. Ever. Which is saying something. Knowledgeable readers will have seen their fingerprints on numerous – and I do mean *numerous* – projects in these pages over the years, ranging from land protection to organizational support. It's the former that's relevant here, and that also speaks to the sheer length of time that they've been guiding and supporting the state's conservation community. Joan Hammill Field was donated to the Village of Wayne over two decades ago. This open grassland that straddles the Kane/DuPage county border also abuts the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County's Pratt's Wayne Woods, to which it provides access for equestrians seeking to explore the over 3,400-acre site. The Village wanted to ensure that no one in the future could ever attempt to undermine the intentions behind this gift, and so worked with the Foundation to establish a conservation easement that now protects the entire 8.5-acre site.



Hackberry Emperor along a trail (*Diana Krug*)

✿ **The Conservation Fund** (also Illinois Audubon Society and Openlands, with whom The Fund partnered)

28) A couple years ago I quite justifiably went on at some length discussing two separate land acquisitions in the north Chicago suburbs that both encompassed several hundred acres. Projects of that size simply aren't something you see up here, given land prices. And yet both were at least conceivable; neither were in any way an impossibility.



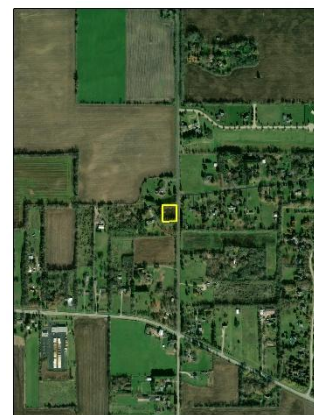
Impossible. That's a word that deserves some consideration, because it's awfully overused. It means that something is "not able to occur, exist, or be done." A lot of what is loudly declared to be impossible is – spoiler alert – nothing of the sort. Yet I don't for a moment hesitate to admit that I would have considered manifestly impossible (and quite possibly laughable) the very idea that suburban Chicago might be home to a land acquisition project encompassing not a few hundred acres, but nearly 1,000.

Any and everyone reading this should be thankful that my lack of imagination isn't an impediment to more visionary people than I getting great things done, because that's exactly what happened early last year. More specifically, the purchase of, if the survey is to be believed, 948.8961 acres (and if you think that survey is accurate to four decimal places – 4.3 square feet – you are more credulous than I) outside the village of Richmond in eastern McHenry County. The deal was made possible thanks in very large part to over two decades spent by senior leadership at the McHenry County Conservation District (MCCD) building and cultivating a deep relationship with the former owner, coupled with the vision and resources that really only The Conservation Fund can bring to bear. Continuing with the theme of "it takes a village", it should come as no surprise that such a substantial project was truly a team effort, with both the **Illinois Audubon Society** and **Openlands** financially contributing to the effort. The latter has also – with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – assumed ownership and management responsibility for 319.68 acres of the larger site.

What makes this mosaic of woodland, agricultural fields, and wetlands *really* special though is its location. "Huh?" you might be asking. "Didn't you just tell us where it is?" I did, but it's the context that's key here. For that 948 acres finally connects the MCCD's Glacial Park and North Branch preserves, in the process creating a single protected terrestrial landscape of over 5,000 acres. Knitting together these sites and creating such a vast landscape is at the core of the mission of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, and it's to the Refuge that all of this land is destined. Bordering or across road rights-of-way from three smaller parcels that were previously transferred to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and two more that will eventually join them, the entire property will be sold to the Service in stages as funding becomes available, bringing substance to the Refuge as never before.

✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

29) Unless you're a horrible person*, you're feeling at least a bit sorry for whatever project has to follow up on that near 1,000-acre behemoth. And then to see that said follow up is *also* in McHenry County? Talk about unfair competition. This one's doomed to be forgotten before the day is out, right? *Nope!* TLC sees your 1,000 acres and raises you a 0.85-acre unploughed remnant prairie. So, just one of the more ecologically important land protection projects across the entirety of the state of Illinois in all 2024. No biggie.



The floral and faunal implications of that word – remnant – are more significant than even readers of this report likely realize (knowledgeable and of course good looking though each and every one of you are). Remnant prairies contain, by definition, remnant soil bacteria, which a [study](#) at Nachusa Grasslands back in 2017 found it typically takes several decades of active



restoration before the microbiome by and large replicates that found on undisturbed grassland.** *This* prairie – as with so many protected by virtue of its use as a cemetery in the mid-19th century – contains that intact subterranean ecosystem, alongside a terrestrial mix of native flora whose growth the Conservancy is promoting through the simple expedient of prescribed burns and the launching of a genocidal campaign against the sumac that has grown up on the long neglected site.

As an aside, the property is only getting the TLC it needs from, um, TLC because of that same human element that led to it being conserved in the first place. A few years ago, two descendants of one of the families who in 1852 established the land as a final resting place for their kin reached out to the Conservancy to learn whether the organization would have interest in preserving the cemetery, the last burial at which was in 1949. They worked with the land trust to establish the land's ownership and see it formally transferred to the nonprofit, which will give both tombstones and prairie the perpetual care that they need and, in the case of the former, deserve. (*Photo credit: TLC*)

* I really wanted to follow that up with the parenthetical “I’m looking at you, Steve”, but immediately realized that I know a Steve who reads this report, so that was out. I then cycled through a bunch of other names, but had the same problem. Sad.

** Despite the fact that the study abstract’s opening sentence uses a filthy, filthy word that longtime readers know is at best grounds for dismissing the entire paper and at worst casus belli for me to launch a holy war, I give the authors a pass because the research was so darned innovative.

30) The name notwithstanding, the Boloria Meadows preserve has a lot more than meadow. The centerpiece may be a high quality graminoid fen, but our focus today is 14 acres of remnant white and bur oak woodland intercut with a headwaters stream that drains to the fen. Now, 14 acres of remnant oaks is certainly praiseworthy, but when you consider the fact that the preserve is in the middle of a municipality, that kind of scale is downright impressive. The forest – home to the red-headed woodpecker, whose protection has been identified as a priority in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan – is part of a larger woodland, including a small two-acre tract added to the preserve several years ago that the new acquisition now links and fully integrates into the main body of the site.



More prominently, the addition provides something this popular site and dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve has long lacked – *road frontage*. Access to the property’s scenic walking trails is at present afforded by a slender path sandwiched between two houses in a residential subdivision. Dedicated parking? Forget about it. This shall we say suboptimal state of affairs will soon be noticeably improved upon with the installation of a parking lot and kiosk along the road, offering entrance to an expanded trail network that will weave through the addition, providing access to the entire preserve.

31) I expend a good deal of digital ink expounding on the virtues and mechanics of conservation easements. Not as much on what they frequently mean to the landowner; the knowledge that, through this easement, what is oftentimes their home will be forever protected. Now imagine if you will how much more impactful this is when the land is not only your home, but also your livelihood. Such is the case with this 80.5-acre farm in the northern reaches of the rapidly growing village of



Now a farm, forever a farm (TLC)

Bull Valley. Successfully preserving family farms at scale in an urbanizing landscape is a long-term endeavor requiring a mix of patience, deep knowledge of not only conservation but also agriculture, and, above all, profound empathy for the owners of this land – the ability to understand their needs and hopes, and tailor a solution to meet both. Across Illinois, none do so more effectively than The Land Conservancy of McHenry County.

✿ The Nature Conservancy

32) Way back in 2019, I wrote about an inholding along a tributary of Hutchins Creek in the Shawnee National Forest's LaRue-Pine Hills Ecological Area, acquired by TNC with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. Well, turns out past was prologue, only this time the partnership between land trust and foundation protected land along the *actual* Hutchins Creek, about a mile to the southeast of their earlier collaboration.



Everything I wrote then remains applicable today. This mix of oak/hickory forest and open field lies within a Forest Service priority acquisition area due to the dense forest cover that defines much of the valley; in fact it connects two federally designated [Wilderness Areas](#) within the Forest. That offers migratory forest birds protection against nest predation by [cowbirds](#) – the mobsters of the avian world. Hanging out in forest clearings (also in this case known as agricultural fields), these little menaces will, upon spotting the nest of another species, go in and toss out some of the eggs laid by their unsuspecting owners, replacing them with their own. The aggressive cowbird chicks subsequently demand so much food that the parent birds often can't provide enough for everyone, leading to the death of their actual hatchlings. Evolve the ability to identify the imposter eggs and toss them out of your nest? The cowbird has a solution for that too; like any good mafioso, they'll [go in and destroy](#) all of the host bird's remaining eggs in retaliation. It's like "Sure is a nice clutch of eggs you've got there. Be a shame if something happened to them."

Anyhow, this 265.3-acre site in Union County is a much larger inholding than its 2019 predecessor. As with that earlier project (which is shaded teal on the map so as to provide a bit of geographical context), TNC'll restore the open fields to forest before eventually deeding the land to the Forest Service – eliminating the clearings and so further increasing safe nesting habitat for a plethora of bird species that *aren't* winged a-holes.

33-35) Quick recap for those who weren't paying attention when reading last year's report or whose lives inexplicably don't revolve around flood-based conservation projects. Dogtooth Bend in Alexander County – so named because the meandering of the Mississippi River in the area has resulted in a peninsula of [said shape](#) – is a low-lying floodplain protected by several levees that over the last several decades have done a less than stellar job at leveeing.



Following truly massive breaches in 2011 and 2019 that in addition to flooding thousands of acres resulted in the deposition of *tens* of thousands of tons of sand on former farmland, TNC and the Natural Resources Conservation Service initiated a

program that enables landowners to sell conservation easements to NRCS, with the land being restored to native vegetation by the Service, which the owners often then plan to lease for hunting. For those who wish to exit from the property entirely, TNC will purchase the now eased land (so that's two payments to the landowner for land of otherwise limited economic potential) and continue the restoration.

And that's precisely what The Conservancy did last year, building on their first acquisition in the area in 2023. Across three properties – two of which were discussed in prior editions of this report when they were first placed under easement with NRCS while the third was not because the Feds only got around to updating their publicly available easement data shortly before I was writing this such that I was unaware of its existence and yes that *does* annoy me – TNC has taken on 391.5 acres. Small portions of a couple of these properties weren't incorporated into the earlier easements, meaning, for acreage counting purposes, the Conservancy's purchases last year protected an additional 13 acres.

✿ The Wetlands Initiative

36) Yeah, that's right. The Wetlands Initiative. For an organization that's as accomplished as it is prolific, it's long vexed me that I just *never* have occasion to write about their work, since their projects so rarely overlap with my rather limited albeit self-appointed authorial remit in these reports. You can likely guess then how psyched (and surprised) I was to have the pleasure this year of discussing not one but *two* sweet projects that the TWI team have graced us with.



Although not a land trust, at the turn of the millennium the Initiative – never one for small plans – began restoration of nearly 3,000 acres in Putnam County along the Illinois River. What was once a depressional basin drained and farmed through the application of an expansive network of drain tiles and one very large water pump was allowed to reflood in 2001, and work on the property has continued ever since. A 40-acre addition to what is now the Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge...is not part of that basin. Nor is it part of the floodplain. It's some solid upland, actually, and most of it's in agricultural production.

Just as with its low-lying kin however, this one's important because of what it *will* be. Let's start by sticking with the wetlands. A major focus of TWI's efforts at the Refuge is Dore Seep; an Illinois Nature Preserve dedicated only a year after the restoration project began. Groundwater bubbles up from the earth to give life to this unusual community; groundwater that's fed in part from this parcel – a parcel that, it's worth mentioning, came on the market rather unexpectedly, resulting in a pretty rapid negotiation that had a most satisfactory conclusion.

Not all of the moisture that falls upon the land winds up in the groundwater. Much of it feeds the vegetation on site, including part of a bottomland forest along an intermittent stream that the Initiative has been restoring for several years now. That's only a small

portion of the property though. The rest – largely comprising that farm field mentioned earlier will, after a few years of care, add to Illinois' (and the world's) quite limited inventory of sand prairie, with the ancillary benefit of further expanding habitat for the grassland birds that longtime readers of these reports will recall often need large expanses of open land to truly prosper. Just a lot of potential all around, and all from this single parcel. So. That's the first project. Keep reading (or do a keyword search) for the second.

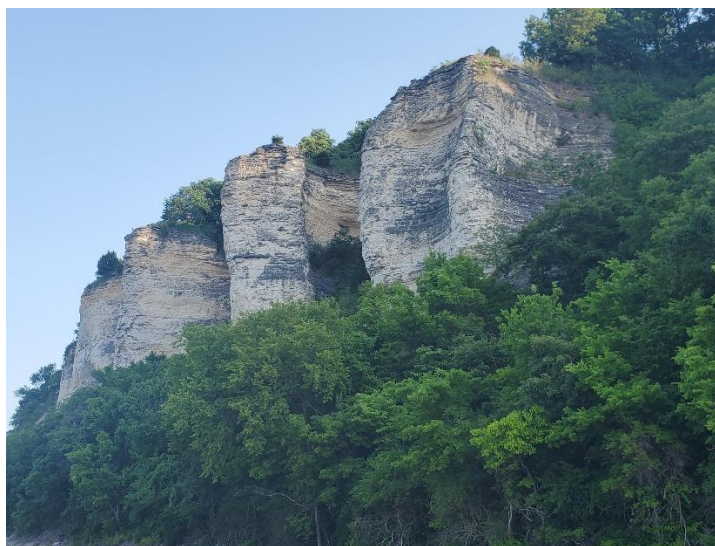
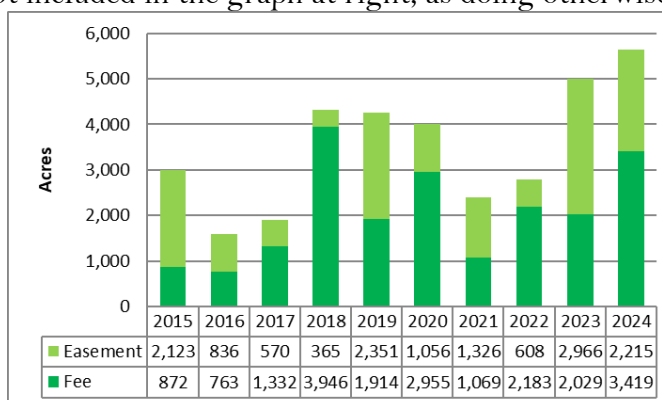


Trout Hill Prairie (*HeartLands Conservancy*)

Public Sector Land Conservation

I don't think it possible to overstate the impact or import of government in the conservation of Illinois' ecological heritage. It's in our public spaces that most experience that natural world, and thus where its appreciation is cultivated. It's in those same spaces that some of the state's most ambitious preservation and restoration initiatives are both born and thrive. Last year was a continuation of both, with the protection of 5,634.5 acres from one end of the state to the other – another record for the ten years I've been keeping track of this stuff.

Before we get going, remember; just as with the private sector conservation endeavors, if a project involved the transfer or further encumbering of a property already protected, I discuss it in detail in the coming pages, but it's not included in the graph at right, as doing otherwise would double-count the land. Similarly, if a project was the result of a public-private partnership (such as one party purchasing an easement and the other fee title, or a buy and flip) that closed within a year of one another, each party received credit for one half of the property's total acreage. Sometimes that means the numbers from the most recent year will change in the subsequent annual report, so don't give me any grief on that score.



Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River
(Cynthia Kanner - PSCC)

✿ Bloomington-Normal Water Reclamation District

1) The Kenneth L. Schroeder Wildlife Sanctuary in McLean County is an unusual beast. Surrounding a water reclamation facility, the ponds at the sanctuary host a plethora of local wildlife, as you might expect, but double as the final stop for wastewater from the nearby City of Bloomington, which after being cleansed at the adjacent facility are further purified by the vegetation thriving in this natural refuge. The preserve is much more than a few ponds though; at over 270 acres, it features extensive wetlands, woodland, trails for visitors, and Little Kickapoo Creek, which meanders through the entire site. That includes an 11.1-acre addition on the southern end of the sanctuary, astride which are a wetland on the west bank and an agricultural field on the east. The entire preserve is one heck of an initiative by the Water Reclamation District



✿ Champaign County Forest Preserve District

2) Illinois' Open Space Land Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant program provides funds to local governments for "acquisition and/or development of land for public parks and open space." I find it eminently appropriate then that a 24.1-acre addition to the River Bend Forest Preserve along the Sangamon River outside the Village of Mahomet will prominently feature both.



Though physically separate from the main site, the property – which, in a nice coincidence, *is* adjacent to an unrelated Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program easement on the opposite shore – will feature the same mix of native vegetation and recreational opportunities as does the original preserve. An oak/hickory upland forest transitions to one of the floodplain variety dominated by silver maple, while in the west, a pasture field will be converted to prairie. Once the existing buildings have been removed, a loop trail will be installed providing ready

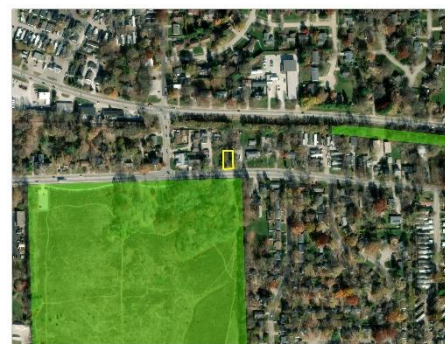


River Bend Forest Preserve (Champaign County Forest Preserve District)

access to all three vegetative communities, as well as giving visitors a fine view of the river – a river home to so many diverse mussels that there's a good chance I'll be writing about the property's dedication into the Illinois Nature Preserve system in the not too distant future.

3) And now for something quite a bit smaller, but that'll arguably have an even greater recreational impact. The Kickapoo Rail Trail runs or will run for over 20 miles from western Vermilion County through to Urbana in neighboring Champaign.

While at present it stops about half a mile west of the city's Weaver Park, both the FPD and the appropriately named Friends of the Kickapoo Rail Trail have been acquiring land with the aim of ultimately linking the two together. To that end, the nonprofit deeded to the District a 0.15 acre connector parcel that's one of a trifecta of small properties that would do exactly that, with additional positive developments expected in the near future.



✿ DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

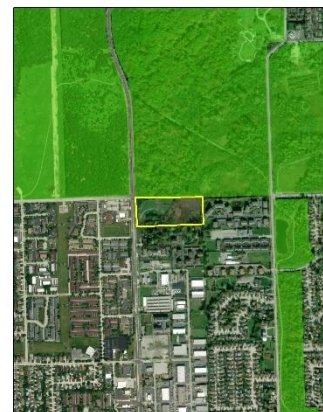
4) A couple years ago I wrote of the beginning of a trail corridor that would eventually connect the Village of Kingston with two Forest Preserve sites less than a mile to the east on the outskirts of the nearby City of Genoa. Unbeknownst to me, that day is apparently coming quite a bit sooner than I anticipated. The corridor was extended in 2023 with the purchase – a few days before Christmas – of 2.6 acres that I was wholly unaware of when writing last year's report. That got the District tantalizing close to the goal, and a 1.29 acre purchase this past fall pushed them over the finish line.

The corridor now runs from Illinois Route 72 all the way to the historic [Hoppe Heritage Farmstead](#) and adjacent South Branch Prairie, and I've little doubt that the trail will appear in short order.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Cook County

5) So, the good folks at the FPCC have what dare I say is a unique naming convention for their sites, in that the line between one preserve and another is often kind of amorphous, while others haven't yet been formally named. That being the case, I bid you welcome to what in my great wisdom I have in the statewide protected lands database melodiously dubbed "Unnamed Southwest Zone Site." One of several such District properties in the southwestern portion of Cook County, *this* Unnamed Southwest Zone Site that I've more recently been told by District staff might possibly maybe be called Camp Sullivan is a mostly wooded expanse with Tinley Creek running through it, on the border of Orland Park and Oak Forest.



Anyhow, while a reasonable person might think that all of the adjacent properties would have long ago been developed, they would be only *mostly* right, like how Wesley was only *mostly dead* (dated? Yes. But some films are *timeless*. Others *are not*). A 13-acre parcel on the southwestern corner of the site is an unexpected but natural addition. Primarily covered by a sedge meadow – which might explain why the property was still undeveloped in 2024 – that spreads out from the existing preserve, the land transitions to an open, upland field closer to the road.

6) I'm not gonna lie; I had mixed feelings about this next project. So, most of those reading this know me primarily as that guy who does the mapping stuff. Typically, when populating the aforementioned statewide protected lands database that forms the backbone of I-View, I'll use parcel data created by the individual counties, since it's usually accurate to within a meter or so and I certainly don't have the underlying plats or other survey data that I'd need to improve on matters.



Except in this case I did. Because in addition to being Guy Who Does the Mapping Stuff, I also have the privilege of working with several land trusts in various contractual roles, and one of those involved documenting the really praiseworthy work done on a conservation easement that just so happens to be adjacent to this 24.7-acre addition to the District's Spring Creek Preserve in the Village of Barrington Hills. And in so doing, I ascertained that said county parcel data is in this one spot off by more like *seven* meters. OK, fine; I tweaked the boundary a bit and called it a day.

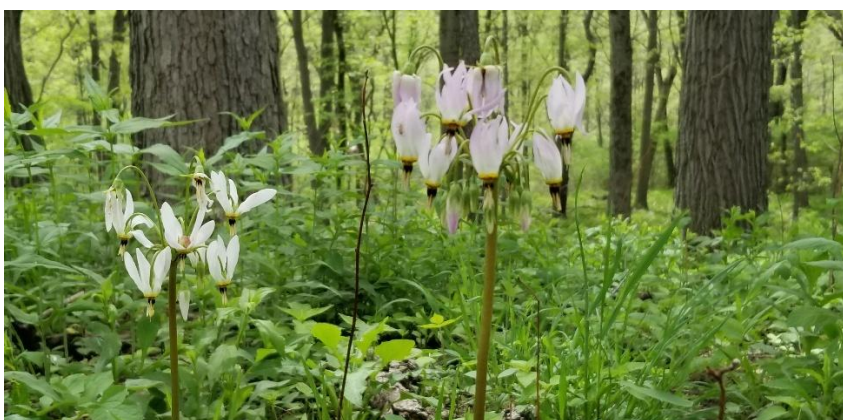
Then this darned addition comes along. Covered in the west by sedge meadow that's part of a much larger complex rolling off the preserve's namesake lake (and that also extends just a bit onto that nearby conservation easement where holy crap the landowner has done a good job controlling cattails and phragmites) which then transitions first to a pond and thence to upland woodland and equally scenic upland buckthorn, the property is unquestionably an excellent addition to the preserve, enabling the majority of the wetland to be managed as a coherent whole.

But what about *me*? I couldn't get away with a few boundary tweaks to a single record anymore. No, now we're dealing with a shared border between Forest Preserve and conservation easement on multiple sides, and I don't have anything close to the documentation I'd need to be definitive in defining those boundaries. Seven meters people. That's like 23 feet. It takes two, maybe three whole seconds to walk that distance! Do you have *any* idea how psychologically and emotionally draining it is making such a mapping judgement call? It's like Eisenhower's decision to launch D-Day, only more so. My life is burdened by the weightiest of matters.



Visual approximation of your author's reasoned reaction while mapping this property.

7-10) For the last few years the Forest Preserve District has been picking up parcels in the southeastern corner of the county, in and around the villages of Glenwood and Ford Heights. This year, with the purchase of not one, not two, not three, but four additional properties, their strategy for the area finally dawned on me. In common with those earlier efforts, all four parcels – totaling 215.17 acres and each of which is currently in agricultural production – lie on or in close proximity to Deer Creek. In short order, a linear preserve has begun taking shape, following the waterway as it wends towards the nearby Thorn Creek – itself a major organizing feature that’s given rise to a string of preserves in both Cook and its neighboring county of Will. This is definitely one to watch in the coming years.



Shooting Stars (*Diana Krug*)

✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

11-12) Mine is, to put it bluntly, a rather specialized readership, so I don’t think I need to exposit at great length – or at all, really – on the many benefits of conservation easements

... ..

You thought I was about to do so anyways so as to eat up space, didn’t you? Well, I’m not. Anyhow, the District is well practiced in using easements to effectively buffer their preserves, something they’ve long pursued in concert with ***The Conservation Foundation***. This partnership continued in fine form last year, with the Foundation assisting two homeowners in the Village of Winfield seeking to protect the natural beauty of their land. Both sites – taking in a combined 3.98 acres – border the District’s West DuPage Woods preserve, and join five existing easements, not only buffering the public land, but permanently preserving the character of the entire community.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

13) Johnson's Mound, outside the village of Elburn, is an unusual beast. Split among three distinct geographic units, the core is a high-quality woodland that's been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. The majority of the property though is a mix of open field (be it grassland in the process of restoration or fields of an agricultural hue) and riparian habitat. That combo is an apt summation of a 22.7-acre addition to the western of the preserve's two principal units. Mostly agricultural field bisected by a scenic residential driveway, the property extends north in a finger to take in a narrow portion of Blackberry Creek as it flows south on its way to the Fox River. Oh, hey, also, you know what this addition does? Take the preserve over the 1,000-acre mark (to 1,000.9, to be precise), which I think is a darned impressive milestone.



14) The Illinois conservation sector is generally pretty genteel. As these reports lay out without fail every year, partnerships are quite common. Everyone's largely pulling in the same direction, and competing conservationists only rarely have need to dispose of the body of their rival in the nearest bog.

All that being said, I'm happy to report that healthy, *non-lethal* competition is alive and well. And that's because, upon seeing that impressively large future addition to the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in neighboring McHenry County that I described above, I can only assume the FPDKC was like "hold my beer", and then got to work. The result? 298.383 acres of wetland, sedge meadow, woodland, and agricultural fields in the village of Huntley off of I-90 and Illinois Route 47. And when I say "sedge meadow", I mean it – several acres of unplowed, remnant sedge meadow which, yeah, that's what we call noteworthy.



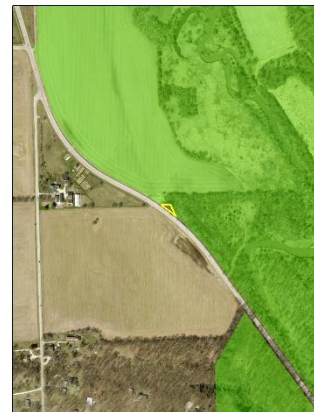
The meadow is part of a larger wetland complex paired with an equally substantive forest headlined by a healthy canopy of mature oaks that got their start right around the time Theodore Roosevelt was getting an unexpected promotion to the White House. That mix makes the site a popular spot for waterfowl, something that visitors will soon be able to enjoy in full following the construction of a loop trail through the preserve alongside parking and a shelter. That'll complement restoration of the agricultural fields to prairie and wetland that expands on that remnant core. This is a really fun project all around – made possible with the invaluable support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – and another mark of the District's awesomeness.

Before we move on, I want to note that the District took action last year on an initiative that I heartily support; the sale of 1.35 acres of surplus land at its Fox River Shores

Preserve outside the Village of Algonquin. Picked up at tax sale in the 1990s when they really shouldn't have been, the small lots were physically disconnected from the rest of the preserve and in the middle of a residential development at that. By divesting itself of the properties, the FPD gets rid of a management headache while simultaneously bolstering its land acquisition fund with the proceeds of the sale, which I say is a win-win for all involved.

✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

15) One tenth of an acre. Just over 4,600 square feet. That is the extent of this wooded donation to the ~932 acre Forked Creek Preserve (the namesake waterway is a tributary of the nearby Kankakee River) both adjacent to and south of the small city of Wilmington. Bordering Illinois Route 102, the land is – well, was – part of a much larger agricultural parcel located *west* of the roadway, so I presume the two were physically connected in one glorious farm field back before the road was built. Thing is, I went and looked at an aerial photo from 1939, and the road was already very much in place. So, yeah; this clearly wasn't adversely impacting anyone, and has been around for an awfully long time.



16) We're back at McKinley Woods for the second year running, this time with a 54-acre addition to the main body of the site. Apropos the name, the preserve is largely a mix of upland forest and prairie with a handful of wooded ravines thrown in for some spice. The new parcel however is none of those things, having most recently been used as pasture.



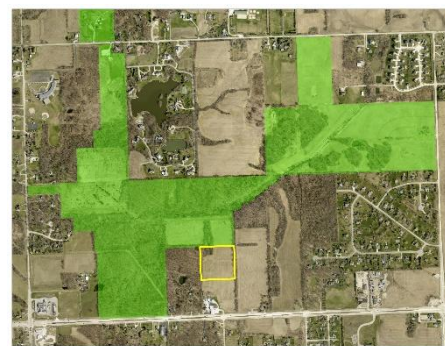
This is the part where I'd typically say something like "the land will be restored to [appropriate vegetative community], adding depth to the [synonym for aforementioned vegetative community] ecosystem" – and it definitely *is* going to be restored – but that wasn't the impetus for the property's



McKinley Woods (Forest Preserve District of Will County)

purchase. Rather, this is largely about access. Per a surprisingly informative and by and large not boring [press release](#) that I implore other writers of press releases to learn from, those aforementioned ravines have heretofore been largely inaccessible. As the addition fronts a public road, that's now no longer an issue, with the parcel thus facilitating both restoration and management of almost the entire preserve.

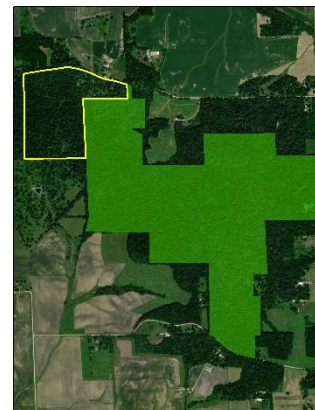
On the border of the Village of Homer Glen and the City of Lockport, Fiddymet Creek is an unassuming tributary of the nearby Des Plaines River made notable by the forest preserve of the same name running along its banks. Forest mixes with open fields in this linear preserve, to which was added, at the very, very, very end of the year, by donation, 9.574 acres of both. Well, mostly field – specifically of the agricultural variety – but a bit of woodland as well. The soon to be retired agricultural land will be overseeded with some hardy grassland species, in common with a neighboring field to the north. And that is all I have for this one.



✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

A few years ago I introduced the IDNR section of this report as the longest in its history; the Department’s accomplishments for the year so numerous that “I strongly suspect never shall the feat be surpassed.” ... I really need to stop making predictions. Yes, not two years after penning that oh so perspicacious assessment, the Department not only surpassed said feat, but did so handily (and they came darned close to doing so in 2023 as well). They’re very, very good at this, is all I’m saying. OK; to keep from being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of material, last time I advised streaming some inspirational tunes while perusing the state’s many and varied projects before settling on something a bit more [appropriate](#) for the moment. That recommendation still holds. All righty then. Let’s get into this!

18) Readers with good memories or a penchant for high quality woodlands will recall that a couple years ago I had the pleasure of writing about Ward’s Grove State Natural Area in Jo Daviess County when the county’s eponymous land trust, with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – acquired 70.1 acres of forest off the northwest side of the nearly 336-acre site (at the time I wrote 71.2, but apparently a subsequent survey found otherwise. Duly noted, and corrected). The SNA was dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve well over 35 years ago and, as I wrote at the time,



Kristie DeBrun - IDNR

hosts a mature understory and unbroken canopy; the fruits of decades of restoration and management of this mix of mesic and dry-mesic forest. Anyhow, what was already unbroken forest is now unbroken forest *ownership*, with the IDNR purchasing the property from the land trust early last year.

19) Hey, you know what's great? The 2024 remake of *Shōgun*, but also, connectivity, specifically of protected lands. And that's what we get with this 147.05 (net) acre addition to the Bull Valley State Fish & Wildlife Area – though “addition” is kinda misleading, because the property is a satellite of the existing SFWA which lies a few miles to the north. Keeping with the Illinois Nature Preserves theme, the Boone Creek Fen Nature Preserve is, without question, the *weirdest* looking site in the entire INPC system, which is impressive given that there're well north of 600 sites in said system. Established over a 13-year period from the late 1990s through the early 2010s, the Preserve, as you can see on the aerial photo to the right, encompasses a half dozen disconnected units with an ownership that's even more diverse. As you might've surmised by the name, all of these privately-held properties are unified by what – surprisingly to my mind – is a healthy fen community largely surrounded by the Village of Bull Valley in central McHenry County. Now, fens are really uncommon, dependent as they are on a continuous supply of cool, clean groundwater, so as I've written in the past that alone is reason to celebrate their protection, but this is also one of the *largest* fen communities in the state. Oh, also, per the good people at the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, it just so happened to have the distinction of being the single highest quality unprotected fen community in all of northeastern Illinois.



Anyhow, the fen and its namesake waterway – the core of which flows through the property – are clearly the stars of this particular show, but that said it also has one heck



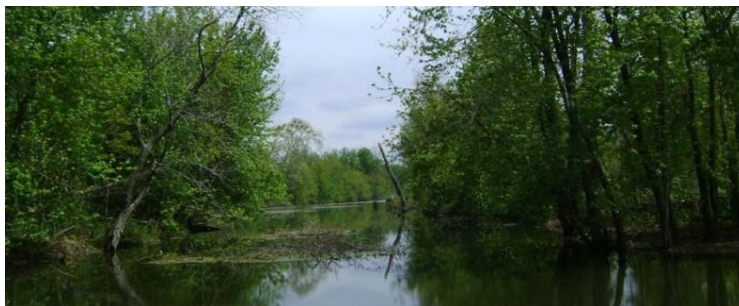
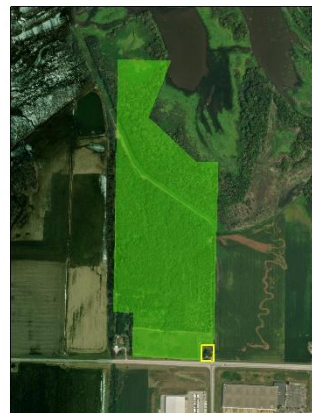
of a supporting cast in the form of extensive wooded uplands to the south and a slightly less elevated but still more elevated than the fen thank-you-very-much grassed field in the north. The site's centrality is demonstrated by the fact that it links together nearly all of the previously lonely Nature Preserve pieces into a coherent whole.

You might've thought I was finished after that last sentence, which any reasonable person would have to agree is, while not the most moving prose, still a solid close. Well, I'm not, because I'd be remiss if I didn't note that a good number of those Nature Preserves were first protected by easements – easements that were inspired by the example of one man, Mr. Dick Babcock, then owner of the preserve on the west side of the state property. Mr. Babcock led the effort to enact legislation enabling private landowners to permanently protect their land via a newfangled instrument called a “conservation easement”. It was through his efforts that the state legislature passed the [Real Property Rights Conservation Act](#) that serves as the legal bedrock upon which all conservation easements rest. So in a very real way, every single conservation easement in the state comes back to Bull Valley. (Photo credits: Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)



20) I've written about Milan Bottoms in these reports several times over the last few years. Granted, that was because I was misinformed regarding the closing date for the transfer of the 92.2-acre site along the Illinois River in Rock Island County from a regional land trust that had purchased the property in 2008 to the DNR and so ended up talking about the same project in both the 2021 and '22 editions, but still. Wrote about it several times.

For anyone who's forgotten the details, you're in luck, because the acquisition of a 0.78-acre lot at the southeast corner of the State Natural Area affords us an opportunity to revisit this unusual site. Part of the largest floodplain forest and marsh (largely backwater swamp) in the Upper Mississippi, the land provides nesting areas for a large assortment of birds, including bald eagles and red-shouldered hawks. Access to this avian haven has long been through the good graces of a private couple whose rental house was served by a conveniently positioned driveway. When said couple expressed interest in selling the parcel, DNR staff grabbed the opportunity, largely due to what to me is the bemusing fact that the cost of simply buying the land was a good deal less than the cost of building a new entrance.



Milan Bottoms (*Natural Land Institute*)

21) This next one's a quickie, a statement which I can only imagine has been met by most reading this with a mix of relief and incredulity. What we've got here are 45.9 acres of woodland near the southern end of the impressively linear Rock Island Trail State Park as it passes through the Village of Dunlap in eastern Peoria County. The land certainly wasn't needed for the trail itself, but it's a nice addition all the same, made more so by the documented presence in multiple nearby sites of the *federally* endangered rusty-patched bumblebee. The bee needs forested habitat in order to nest, which becomes relevant when one takes note of the fact that 1) the insect generally sticks to an area about a mile in diameter and 2) as astute readers might observe on the map at right, outside of the State Park, there aren't a whole lot of other wooded refuges in the vicinity for the discerning queen bee looking to set up shop.



22) As most anyone perusing these annual compendiums knows, the Franklin Creek Conservation Association not only created the State Natural Area that bears its name pretty much singlehandedly, but has for the last several decades acquired surrounding parcels that were then subsequently sold to the Department. That work hit something of a milestone last year, with acquisition by the state of 79.5 acres on the west side of the property in northern Lee County that takes it to just over 1,000 acres. So, congratulations to all involved are most assuredly in order.



You know who else deserves congratulations? Me. Because *this* 79.5 acres was first purchased by the Association in 2022, meaning I can copy and paste my description of the project from that year's report, precluding the need to actually think of something new, let alone original to say. This must be what it feels like to use generative AI to write a school report. Anyhow, without further delay, I remind you that the property – acquired with the support of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** – extends the SNA to and anchors it on Robbins Road. It's also only a quarter mile south of the Nachusa Grasslands, opening the potential to notably expand the connectivity of these two legitimately neat preserves.

23) Speaking of the 2022 annual report, that was also the year I revealed to the world the shocking fact that the 1,449.9-acre Copperhead Hollow State Fish & Wildlife Area – located about three miles north of Pere Marquette State Park in Jersey County – was, in fact, Copperhead Hollow State Fish & Wildlife Area and *not* (as I had previously and confidently asserted when discussing an addition thereto) a mere unnamed satellite of its larger neighbor.



One person who I suspect was always aware of the land's identity was the three decade plus owner of 185.7 acres on the SFWA's northwest corner, where open fields are surrounded by dense woodland on rolling hills cut through by wide trails. After



Aforesaid legacy (Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

confirming the Department's interest in purchasing the property, the landowner generously donated the parcel to the University of Illinois, from whom the IDNR purchased the site. Thus did this one act benefit society twice over, providing funds to one of the state's premier public educational institutions while preserving the land forevermore. That's one heck of a legacy.

24) *Still* keeping with the 2022 edition of my annual compendium, in that weighty tome, I had occasion to discuss an addition to Sand Ridge State Forest in Mason County. To be honest, I couldn't find much to say at the time about the site's new eastern appendage. Naturally, I thus devoted the space to discussing the land's acquisition history during the Depression and the subsequent 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps origin of the multitudinous pine plantations spread across the property. Apropos of nothing, that acquisition created a mostly wooded three-sided inholding to its north – a 32.2-acre parcel that has itself now been incorporated into Illinois' largest state forest. The land also includes a home that'll be used for site staff housing, which on a 7,515-acre site featuring a wide assortment of vegetative communities needing care I think we can all agree is an unquestionably good thing.



25) On the subject of history, last year I had occasion to write about an addition to Illinois and Michigan Canal State Park. There wasn't much to say about the parcel itself so, attempting to find a clever workaround, I regaled readers with the political history of the canal, which like so much in the early decades of the 19th century revolved around *the* central issue of the day: [breeches](#) or [pantaloons](#)? Just kidding. The issue was slavery. The answer to that question in antebellum America is *always* "slavery." Anyhow, this I will argue legit fascinating backstory gave me something interesting to talk about, and that was that. So imagine my surprise and consternation when 2024 brought another addition to the linear and historic site. This time around, we're looking at a rather larger tract. The donation from a family company of 141.9 acres in Grundy County is a mix of largely open water wetland and wet woods on the north bank of the canal, and is located a bit south of the village of Minooka.



26) It's no secret that Mississippi Palisades State Park is something of an avian sanctuary for the forest loving among our feathered friends. Overlooking the Mississippi River in Carroll County, the park offers spacious breeding habitat for woodland birds. It was to both maintain and enhance said habitat that, in 2021, the Natural Land Institute acquired the 56-acre White Wood Ridge Farm with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, a mostly wooded expanse identified by the DNR "as among the highest quality woodland examples within the Wisconsin Driftless Natural Division" shared with an agricultural field that would now be returned to forest.



As I wrote at the time, the plan was to sell the property – part of an expanse that DNR staff have classified as among their highest priority for acquisition – to the State “within the next two or three years” for incorporation into the state park. That time period has elapsed, the sale has been made, and Mississippi Palisades is that much more impressive.



“Mostly wooded” was perhaps an understatement.
(Natural Land Institute)

27) A wooded stretch along the main entrance into Illinois Beach State Park presents a nice transition; from densely packed downtown Zion on the one side to an open expanse of prairie and dune, beach and savanna on the other. Thing is, until recently the state didn’t own this 8.1-acre parcel, with the land planned for development into dense housing. Fortunately for all those reading this report, the housing market is hot, but it’s apparently not *that* hot, presenting the DNR with the opportunity to incorporate what I’m pretty sure most folks always assumed was already a part of the park into, um, the park.



While I’m on the subject, Illinois Beach is cool for a lot of reasons, but one of my favorites is panne. That’s something few have ever heard of – an assertion I can confidently make because this unusual vegetative community doesn’t even have a Wikipedia entry. I’m serious; go look the thing up in your search engine of choice. “Panne” is a really nice fabric or finish thereto, a coating for food and also, apparently, a shapeshifting character in the Fire Emblem videogame series. “De Panne” is a municipality in Belgium. That’s it. At least, that’s all I found.

I suspect this unusual vegetative community is so relatively unknown because it is *really* rare. How rare? As the DNR’s official handbook on the subject succinctly explains, it’s “...restricted to wet and wet-mesic swales in calcareous sand or the remains of ancient beach ridges or dune and swale topography within one mile of Lake Michigan.” Floristically similar to a graminoid fen or – as you might expect – calcareous seep but with looser soil, so far as I can figure, this basically means you’ll find it at Illinois Beach and quite possibly nowhere else. Like I said; very cool.

As an aside, I figure this is as good a spot as any to quickly note that last year the Department gave to Menard County 31.84 acres of abandoned railroad right-of-way. Acquired as part of a proposed trail corridor, the land turned out to be surplus to the state's needs, hence the transfer. OK then! I warned you at the top that the DNR had an epic year. But, I'm happy to report, we are now *finally*...halfway through. Right then. You know what? It's time for an [intermission](#). Go stretch your legs and get a snack.

28) And we're back. Long, *long* before the Age of Aquarius was the much more interesting and much less psychedelic Age of Amphibians, also and more formally known as the Carboniferous which, as the name implies, was a period of abundant plant and animal life, the legacy of which would have absolutely no deleterious consequences several hundred million years later.

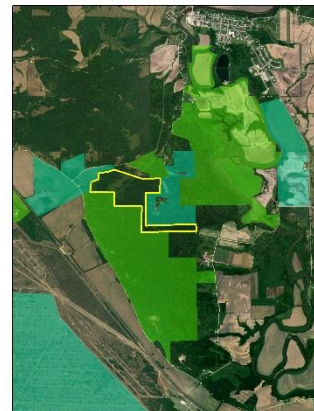
While your ancestors were busy developing the five digits on each limb that most of us – Count Tyrone Rugen being a [notable exception](#)* – enjoy today, tiny weathered grains of quartz and feldspar flowing into a shallow sea were accumulating and compacting into a massive block of sandstone, upon which 315 million years later Dixon Springs State Park arose. Located on the west side of Pope County, a wooded 1.53-acre addition along Illinois-146 to the now 785.7-acre park (which borders the Shawnee National Forest to both north and west) simplifies the park's boundary. And that's a good thing.



Not a photo of the addition, but a photo of the state park itself, shamelessly lifted – with permission – from the DNR's Dixon Springs webpage.

* I know; two references to the same film in one report. What can I say? I go with what works for the situation. There aren't exactly a lot of opportunities to make an *Oppenheimer* gag, and if someone can figure out how to work in an instantly recognizable *Everything Everywhere All at Once* or *Squid Game* quip, well, you're smarter than I am so you should be the one writing these things.

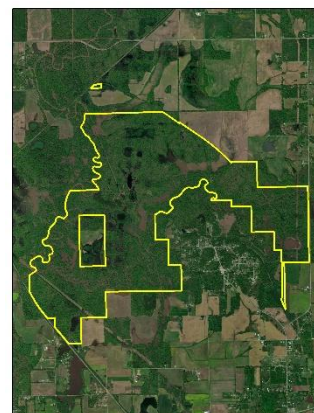
29) Last year in this space I regaled readers with the tale of the Hanover Forest Land & Water Reserve – part of the Hanover Bluff macrosite in Jo Daviess County that kind of, sort of overlooks the Mississippi River and that was sold to the IDNR by the nonprofit Natural Land Institute. Not one of my more memorable pieces really; hey, they can't all be winners. Regardless, this dynamic duo was back at it in 2024, this time in the form of an adjacent 115.56 acres dedicated as additions to the Hanover Bluff Nature Preserve. To provide a bit of context, the map at right is once again a Special Presentation™, with the steadily expanding DNR property in green, and privately protected or federally-owned parcels shaded in teal. This is a conservation macrosite that exists solely because a whole lot of groups combined their efforts to bring it to fruition, featuring as it does current or former land holdings of four land trusts, the state, and the federal government. It's *almost* like partnerships and collaboration have actual practical value beyond simply being something you pretend to engage in whenever filling out a grant application...naw, I'm just joshing you. That'd be crazy talk, right?



Funny story. I've been writing about Hanover Bluff for years, but it never crossed my mind that it was, you know, *a bluff* – until I saw this photo.

(Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

30) There've been some big projects described in these pages this year, but for anyone looking for the *biggest*, well, your wait is over. Wrapping around lowlands surrounding the city of Orient in Franklin County, the appropriately named Orient Bottoms is 1,728.4 acres of forest-y goodness. More specifically, bottomland forest, which occupies well over 1,400 acres of the property astride Big Muddy Creek and the Middle Fork thereof, with the remainder occupied by wetlands and scattered depressional lakes that formed as a result of underground mining operations. You don't need me to explain the ecological value of such a large, unfragmented forest, so instead I'm taking this opportunity to draw



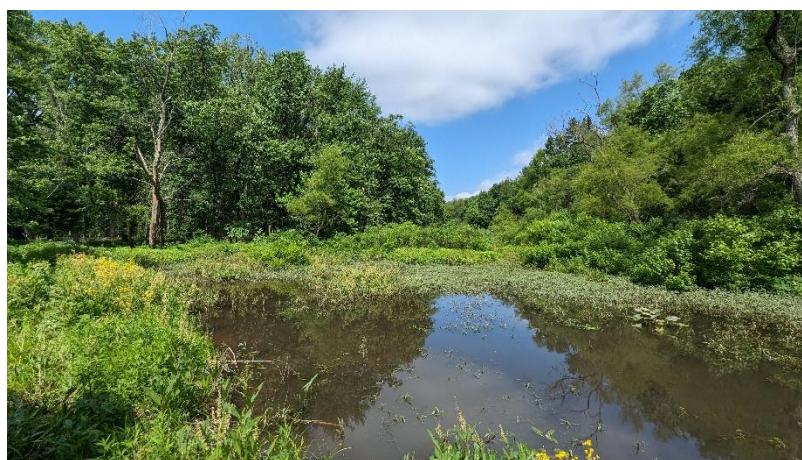
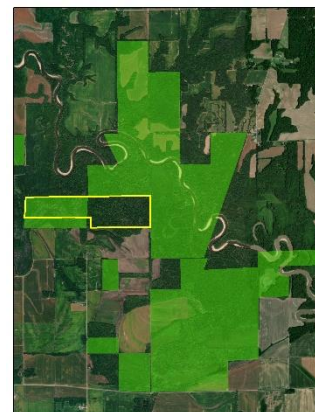
attention to an unsung hero of Illinois conservation – the IDNR employee who had to traipse around this sprawling forest and wetland to survey the darned place. The state doesn't purchase any property without a survey (the legal variety; not one of flora and fauna though yeah, those are also nifty and I will concede kinda, sorta important. I'm a



Orient Bottoms (*Kristie DeBrun – IDNR*)

mapping guy though, so this is all about property boundaries), such that this master of his craft walks and documents every single parcel the Department commits to acquiring. As you may have noticed, of late that has been *a lot* of projects. So three cheers for dedicated public employees folks. We are not paying these people enough.

31) Back in the 2022 edition of this report (yeah, you're not imagining things. 2022 is being name dropped an awful lot in this section, right?), I had occasion to discuss a major expansion of the Chauncey Marsh State Natural Area in Crawford and Lawrence Counties. Originally established to protect a marsh ecosystem that per the DNR is the highest quality example of said community across the whole of the Wabash Valley, the addition added extensive woodlands to the state property, protecting a good chunk of the Illinois Natural Area Inventory site that takes in forest and wetland alike. You'll note that "a good chunk" is not a euphemism for "all" or even "most", and that's what a new 135.3-acre acquisition aims to address. A mix of forest and wetland, the addition – 52.1 acres of which were previously protected via an NRCS Wetland Reserve Program easement – adds both breadth and depth to an already impressively substantial natural sanctuary.



I promised you forest and wetland, and I keep my promises.

(*Kristie DeBrun – IDNR*)

32) Miller-Anderson Woods State Natural Area doesn't get a whole lot of attention, but that's just proof – and you might want to sit down for this one – that social media isn't exactly a fount of discerning opinion and wisdom. Straddling the border of Bureau and Putnam counties west of the Illinois River, much of the over 500-acre forest is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. Accessing and maintaining the northern reaches of said Nature Preserve was made a good deal easier last fall with the addition of a 27.7-acre tract bordered on two sides by the existing Natural Area and on the other two by public roads. In addition to making the lives of the prescribed burning folks rather less stressful, forests ranging from moderate to high quality on steep, seep-filled slopes surrounding a retired agricultural field offer opportunities for restoration while adding depth to the existing protected habitat, such that I easily see why this one has long been on the Department's wish list.



33) For our next stop, we're back in Lake County; I know, I'm as surprised as you are to return to my home turf. Right, so, Volo Bog is something special. You don't have to take my word for it – unimpeachable though it is. The Nature Conservancy is the largest land conservation organization on the face on the planet, having protected somewhere around 120 million acres across the globe. And it all started in 1958 with this humble assemblage of floating vegetation. Seriously; this was literally the first property they ever purchased, with funds donated by individuals and groups across the state, including from children who raised money through letter writing campaigns in their classrooms, some of whom I like to think may still remember that little educational campaign that jumpstarted the conservation behemoth we know today.



Expanded over the intervening decades, today's Volo Bog State Natural Area takes in a mosaic of vegetative communities. Prairie and wetland define one such addition, purchased in 1999. At the time, the seller elected to retain 18.82 adjacent acres to farm and live on, granting to the Department a right of first refusal. Fast forward a quarter century, and the DNR was able to exercise that

right to a property encompassing open fields, open water, and quite a few open buildings. Extending the Natural Area's boundary south to parallel a public road, the parcel provides both buffer and depth, making it a fine addition to this storied site.

(Photo: The actual bog. Credit: IDNR)

34-36) This report has featured a decent number of archaeologically significant sites over the years, including several in this edition alone, but if we're being honest all pale in comparison to Cahokia. The ahistorically named city was at its peak in the early part of the 2nd millennium – a major if not *the* major center of the [Mississippian culture](#). Abandoned by the mid-14th century, in the 20th it was dedicated as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). And last year it grew by 2.37 acres thanks in large part to some *very* dedicated individuals.



No public agency or site could ask for a better partner than the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society. For almost half a century the Society has worked to preserve Cahokia and to educate the public about this international treasure (and I can call it that without being accused of hyperbole, because UNESCO has my back). Purchasing and then deeding to the state parcels that once lay within the ancient city, they've had a *major* hand in making this place what it is today. That tradition continued last year with the donation of two parcels on the eastern outskirts of the city. The first is a wooded acre directly abutting the main body of the site, while the second is an open field that once contained a residence in a community that has grown up adjacent to the long abandoned pre-Columbian urban center.

Joining these was a third parcel; a single very special acre that the DNR had been endeavoring to purchase for quite some time. Located on Collinsville Road immediately west of the Historic Site's main entrance, the property was long a fenced rectangle covered in aggregate that was used a storage depot for towed vehicles. Prior to the sale, the owners removed both fence and stone to facilitate the land's restoration – a process that will continue under the Department's care, transforming what was once an eyesore into a seamless element of a much greater whole.



Before and after at the Collinsville Road parcel. (Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

37) As this year's report alone makes clear, Jo Daviess County isn't exactly lacking for quality natural lands (or for that matter archaeological treasures, or geological variety, or Civil War history, or... ..let's just say it's a lot more diverse than my home in suburban Chicago). Even amongst this milieu, Apple River Canyon State Park stands out. Spread out along the river from which it takes its name, the park is home to numerous Threatened or Endangered species – likely one of the reasons nearly half has been enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system. Not coincidentally, both of these elements are found on a 147.7-acre addition to the park's largest unit. First acquired in 2018 by The Natural Land Institute (when I erroneously reported the net area as 150.2 acres and which has since been duly corrected) with the support among others of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and subsequently restored with financial assistance from The Conservation Fund, the property hosts at least three state-listed plants as well as the *federally* threatened Indiana Bat. The plan was always to eventually sell the land to the DNR for incorporation into the park, and it's a pleasure to see that day arrive – probably for none so much as NLI, which gets the property off of their books!



38) This is another [quick one](#). Ten Mile Creek State Fish & Wildlife Area is a widely disbursed site with units scattered across Hamilton and Jefferson Counties. Our point of interest today is smack dab in the middle of all that; 7 acres that are part of an inholding surrounded by the state land on three sides. This forested parcel starts out flat but quickly slopes down in the east, transitioning into a small drainageway that flows north into a tributary of – say it with me now – *Big Creek*. Wait, what? Given the name of the place, you didn't see that one coming, did ya? I told you; this is a SFWA that's taking in a lot of parcels sprinkled across a wide area. The property's namesake water is itself in another unit entirely about five miles away.



39) You've got to admit, "Burning Star" is a memorable name, albeit one clearly coined by officials at the Department of Redundancy Department. First attached to what is today the Burning Star State Fish & Wildlife Area north of Carbondale when the land was a coal mine, today this over 4,500-acre preserve is a reclaimed mosaic of forest and scrub, grassland and wetland, rivers and ponds. Basically, the works. As it happens, a 118-acre addition has at least a little of all of that, though forest is the biggie here. Surrounded by the existing site on three sides, the property is largely comprised of bottomland hardwoods; part of a larger woodland community that sprawls across the area. Those hardwoods provide both nesting and brooding habitat for a variety of shrubland birds



and two unaltered segments of the Little Muddy River that largely flows through the SFWA, making it a natural addition to this already substantial ecological and community resource.

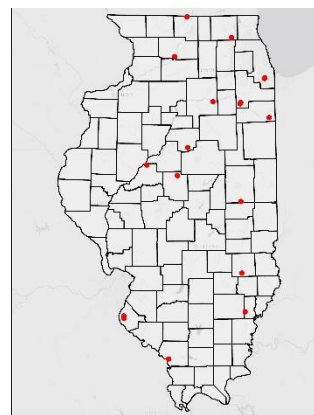
✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

The Illinois Nature Preserves system is without question one of the most valuable conservation resources in the state, and one of the most powerful in the country. Land enrolled in the system is for all intents and purposes protected from any threat of development, ever. And last year 1,472.4 acres across 18 sites joined those sacrosanct ranks. In common



with 2023, there was a frankly bizarre amount of symmetry going down, with nine Nature Preserve dedications (which take in almost exactly $\frac{1}{3}$ of the newly protected acreage) and an identical nine Land & Water Reserve registrations (taking in the other weirdly exact $\frac{2}{3}$).

Half of the new sites are in Chicagoland, the other half downstate.



The public and nonprofit sectors are always major contributors when it comes to newly dedicated or registered sites, but they're not alone, joined each year by private individuals across the state who own and steward a panoply of forests and prairies, streams and wetlands. High quality ecological jewels that they have in many cases cared for over the course of decades, and which are now protected forevermore. Let's take a look at those, shall we? *(Photo credit: Diana Krug)*

40) Birk's Prairie Nature Preserve is the most recent result of a quarter century long effort by a husband and wife team who have been rebuilding the prairie and forest ecosystems of Edwards County from the ground up. Dedicating their first Nature Preserve in 2000, this latest project is a 7.92-acre Grade C mesic prairie restoration (note for the laypeople: that is not easy, nor quick, to accomplish) that has the distinction of being the only prairie community listed on the INAI in that portion of the state. The site supports over a half dozen rare floral species, including, in a development I frankly find baffling given the area's widespread and longstanding agricultural character, a state endangered flowering perennial. Guess Ian Malcom [was right](#).

41) On the subject of prairies, our next stop is Luginbuhl's Prairie Grass Hill Land and Water Reserve in Woodford County. While the Reserve comes in at 4.72 acres including good quality mature dry-mesic upland and mesic bottomland forests as well as a perennial stream, it's the 0.2 acre namesake that's the star here. This Grade A glacial drift hill prairie (that's an exceptionally high quality vegetative community on a type of prairie that, if you've read the first HeartLands piece in the Private Sector section of this report up above you know is really, really rare). That said, woodlands shouldn't be overlooked either; multiple landowners have been actively managing the forest for decades, and it shows, with the arboreal portions of the site hosting mature oaks and hickories in the upland and a plethora of water loving species in the lowland.

42) Switching things up, we next move to western Jackson County overlooking the Shawnee National Forest a bit east of the Mississippi. The Fountain Bluff Land and Water Reserve is the first of a two part project, with an adjacent Nature Preserve coming to these pages next year. The comically linear 12.7-acre L&WR nonetheless hosts three state threatened or endangered species of flora and fauna in addition to not-quite-threatened-but-still-darned-rare-in-these-parts plant species. How is this possible? Because the place's botanical diversity is matched only by the health and vitality of the same. Mesic upland forest mix with dry sandstone cliffs and glades here to create a real visual and ecological treat.



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

43) Sticking with the westernmost reaches of the state but moving up to the village of Valmeyer in Monroe County, the 11.2-acre Heather's Hollow Nature Preserve abuts a nearly 600 acre Land and Water Reserve owned by the municipality in question. This is another preserve owned and cared for over decades by a dedicated landowner who wanted to ensure the land that means so much to them is protected forever. Mature dry upland forest surround several limestone glades, with the land supporting rare plants and animals both. So that's nice, I would say.

44) We close with the Sherwood Addition to Nachusa Grasslands Land and Water Reserve in Ogle County. Located, as the name implies, along the Rock River next to the Lowden-Miller State Forest...wait, what? Eh, it's less than a half mile from the state's premier tallgrass prairie restoration, so we can run with this. Anyhow, this 13.79-acre largely mesic and dry-mesic upland forest also hosts a restored prairie. In addition to its

ecological bona fides, the property serves a valuable role as one of a series of parcels connecting Lowden-Miller and Castle Rock State Forests to the north with The Nature Conservancy's Nachusa Grasslands and, from there, the Franklin Creek State Natural Area to the south.

✿ Lake County Forest Preserve District

45-46) I'll be frank with you. The addition of a 1.6-acre residential homesite to the over 2,800-acre Lakewood Forest Preserve outside the Village of Wauconda in western Lake County was never going to give me much to talk about, even abutting as it does the Broberg Marsh Nature Preserve that I discussed just last year. Fortunately for me, it was followed shortly thereafter by 74.3 acres about a mile to the east – *also* an addition to Lakewood Forest Preserve and *also* adjacent to a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve (albeit a different site in the form of McLean Woods and Wetlands Nature Preserve). OK, first off, do you realize how confusing that paragraph



would be to anyone not immersed in Illinois conservation? All I'm saying is that this sector could stand for coming up with a synonym for "preserve" so that it's not used to describe any and every type of preservation-related thingamabob.

Anyhow, both properties lie along major area roads; Fairfield in the case of the former, Gilmer in the latter. That larger property is primarily a mix of upland, open water, agricultural fields and a bit of woodland. Surrounded by the existing District property on about 2.5 sides (you like how I managed to avoid using the word 'preserve' again there? Well, I do.), the parcel's addition very clearly rationalizes the boundary of this portion of the site. Not only will it permit the creation and management of a grassland that has substantially greater depth than is currently the case, but the acquisition obviates the potential for this prime spot to be developed into a subdivision – which is



Wood Betony. Not at Lakewood. (Diana Krug)

really the obvious alternative, was the plan for several decades, and is something that I think we can all agree wouldn't have had the most salubrious impact on the surrounding high-quality grassland and sedge meadow.

47) The Lake County Forest Preserve District made organizational history this past fall with the establishment of the Lotus Country Don't-Call-It-a-Forest-Preserve. Located just east of Grass Lake and adjacent to a public park, the Definitely Not a Forest Preserve marries upland woodland and a small agricultural field with the real prize; an isolated wetland housing the single largest heron rookery in Lake County. To give you a sense as to the value the professionals ascribe to the hatchery, longstanding District policy holds that new preserves should be a minimum of 100 acres, which this 41.2-acre site most definitively is not. Its central role in ensuring the vitality of the region's avian population is what led to the decision that rather than develop public access to the property, it will instead be managed exclusively for the protection of the rookery – hence its formal and unique designation: the Country Lotus *Conservation Preserve*.



Heron rookery in action. (*Lake County Forest Preserve District*)

✿ McHenry County Conservation District

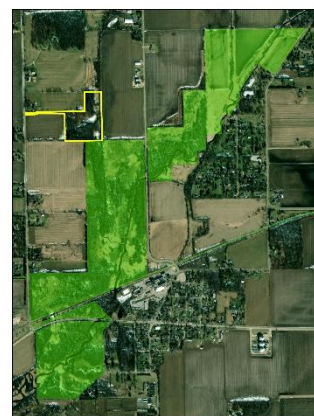
48) Less than a decade ago, the natural features of the MCCD's 429.8-acre Goose Lake could be pithily summed up as...Goose Lake. That in itself was really valuable though, because this small, seemingly innocuous wetland hosts one of the largest breeding populations of the endangered Yellow-headed blackbird in the entire state, which just might be why the lake is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve.

Given that even generously defined the lake and its immediate environs take in less than a quarter of the site though, that left quite a bit on the table, in this case in the form of lots of agricultural fields. As should surprise none of my readers, the team that once brought you the remeandering of the nearby Nippersink Creek saw this opportunity and ran with it, restoring the upland to a vibrant prairie complementing the low-lying wetland. The result is a birder cornucopia, with both wetland and grassland species thriving across the preserve – not to mention a healthier wetland which, for obvious avian reasons, is something we can all firmly get behind.



“So,” I hear you wondering “this is all great, but what’s it got to do with land protection?” Well, now that the restoration work has been completed, anyone who’s perambulated along the Hebron Trail which bisects the site has undoubtedly noticed that at a certain point you’ve got restored prairie and wetland to the west, prairie and wetland to the east, yet more prairie and wetland to the south, *and*...a farm field to the north. That will change soon enough, as this 26.5-acre parcel has been incorporated into the larger site, setting the stage for an unbroken vista of prairie goodness.

49) Although by definition I must have mapped it when first documenting the state’s protected natural lands, upon learning last year that Beck’s Woods grew by 15.83 acres, my first reaction was befuddlement, as I had no memory of this several hundred acre preserve along Piskasaw Creek outside the village of Chemung. Turns out though the preserve has a notable claim to fame that means I’ll never forget it again; it was the very first property purchased by the newly created Conservation District back in 1973. I don’t know who Monsieur Beck was, but his woods are what this 15.83-acre addition is all about, encompassing the last significant unprotected portion of this mix of forest and wetland that stretches over a mile from north to south. A fitting legacy, I would say, for the voters and officials who brought the District into being over fifty years ago.



✿ Peoria Park District

50) The Peoria Park District is unusual, as evidenced by the fact that they appear in these pages on a not irregular basis – something that can be said of no other municipal agency in the state. That prominence is the well-earned result of the District’s focus on the natural world, something that’s been central to their mission for a long time. A *long* time.

Formally known as the Pleasure Driveway and Park District of Peoria, this name that sounds right out of the Gilded Age...is, yes, straight out of said Gilded Age. Founded all the way back during the presidential administration of Grover Cleveland (during the second of his non-consecutive terms, *obviously*), the Park District mixes municipal recreation with large scale restoration, preserving and enhancing thousands of acres of forest in the hills overlooking the nearby Upper Peoria Lake.



Nowhere is that more clearly in evidence than at Margaret Rutherford Woods in the Village of Peoria Heights. Why? Well, notice those differing shades of green on the aerial photo to your right. Occam’s Razor might suggest that’s a result of my getting lazy with the mapping, or, barring that, trying to branch out on the color wheel, but nope. That’s dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve you’re looking at, encompassing the majority of the site. As such, a 14.7-acre addition in the heart of the woodland – acquired with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – takes on added import, banishing forever the potential fragmentation of this healthy forest community.

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

51) It’s not commented upon nearly enough, but the Natural Resources Conservation Service is one of the most effective land protection agencies at work in Illinois. Last year was no different; we’re looking at 14 easements spread across the southern third of the state. One of those – 479.7 acres on the west bank of the Illinois River in Pike County (seen at right) – further protects the lion’s share of an engaging preserve discussed way back in the 2017 edition of this report established and operated by Great Rivers Land Trust. The rest are all new people, and take in an impressive 2,160.8 acres established under two longstanding programs; the definitely named by committee Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) and the similarly melodiously named Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easement (EWPP-FPE).



52-53) Let's start with the WRE, which covers the majority of last year's easements. This one, as the name implies, exists to preserve or restore wetland habitat and water quality, with NRCS, in addition to purchasing the easement, paying 75-100% of the cost of restoring the property to a functional wetland. We begin in far eastern Clark County, along the banks of the Wabash River. A 312.4-acre agricultural field with riparian woodlands follows the river as it briefly but sharply curves to the east. This is paired with a 66.5-acre agricultural property a few miles to the south; part of a complex of NRCS easements taking in nearly 2K acres of restored wet forest and wetland.



54-56) The Wabash continues to feature prominently in our next easement, located in, um, Wabash County. Though as with its peer to the north located along a bend in the river, this 660.8 acres is already a mix of wetland and wet forest. The same can not be said of our final Wabash-adjacent easement of the year, this one a 68.2 acre largely agricultural property in Hardin County, sandwiched between the Shawnee National Forest and over 1,100 acres of existing NRCS easements.



We move inland for our next project; 66.7 fecund acres in western Fayette County.

57-64) And that brings us to our final locale, where eight easements totaling 986.2 acres are equally split between the two aforementioned programs. Where in the state might one find four separate properties both eligible and interested in an initiative whose purpose is helping landowners whose property is at consistent risk of flooding? If you've been reading this report, you already know the answer; we're back at Dogtooth Bend in Alexander County. I'll spare you by not repeating the history of this flood-benighted but ecologically vibrant region; scroll back up to the section detailing The Nature Conservancy's work last year if you need a refresher.



The Service continued its multiyear project to simultaneously financially uplift the area's landowners and restore the wetlands, floodplain lakes, bottomland hardwood forest, cypress/tupelo slough, and cane thickets that covered the land 200 years ago. This might be the single most exciting land protection initiative in the state right now; it's one I at least am watching with *great* interest.

✿ **U.S. Dept. of the Interior – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

65) A couple years back I related the tale of this 63.12-acre parcel at the southern tip of the state, sandwiched between Horseshoe Lake – Alexander State Fish & Wildlife Area to the north and west, and, to the south and east, both the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge and the Cache River as the latter flows into the Mississippi.

As I wrote at the time, Ducks Unlimited purchased the site immediately following its enrollment in an NRCS easement program. As I *also* wrote at the time, this was but the first piece of a larger plan. The two collaborated on restoration of the property, excavating over 12,000 cubic yards of fill from the site, recreating a slough that had been filled and leveled over the decades when the land was devoted to agriculture. Since then, the land has been planted with the same bottomland hardwoods that feature so prominently almost all around it. That task completed, the nonprofit deeded the property to the Service, with the incipient forest now formally incorporated into the aforementioned Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge.



And this is the *before* shot, believe it or not. (*Ducks Unlimited*)

66) The Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge is arguably the most successful conservation initiative Illinois has seen this century – made possible through the dedication of the Fish & Wildlife Service, local land trusts, private foundations, and a stellar citizens support group that I'll be getting back to momentarily. The Refuge is being assembled one piece at a time, through the establishment of conservation easements and the purchase of land, the latter first acquired by those aforementioned land trusts, which hold the property until the Service has the resources to take ownership. Such was the case again last year, with the purchase of 178.8 acres from Openlands near the state line directly east of the village of Hebron.



First acquired in 2021 with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the property, as I wrote at the time, is a mix of peat wetland and former pasture and agricultural fields that's adjacent to the McHenry County Conservation District's (MCCD) appropriately named Hebron Peatland. Adding such a large tract to the ever-growing Refuge is a good in and of itself, but what makes it truly *exciting* is the land's hosting of what the MCCD's recently retired Director of Land Preservation & Natural Resources has identified as the finest sedges he's ever seen; high praise indeed.

Now, about that citizens group I mentioned up above. Friends of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge is one of about 200 such groups supporting various national wildlife refuges around the country. I mention that little fact so that you're aware of the sheer size of the competition that they overcame to be named the [winner](#) by the National Wildlife Refuge Association of the 2024 Molly Krival Award for Refuge Friends Group of the Year – awarded to groups that “have shown exemplary dedication to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.”

Perhaps I'm overly jaded, but I imagine many such groups are largely limited to press releases and the occasional workday. Not this group though. No, *this* Friends got its start by successfully advocating for the creation of Hackmatack in the first place – which is no mean feat. That proved to be but a palette cleanser for what was to come, as over the last decade plus the organization has secured more than \$1M in grant funding for restoration of the new Refuge – which they naturally then led in bringing to fruition – established numerous educational programs and volunteer opportunities, hosted events, helped secure resources to expand the site; the works. I have the pleasure of being able to regularly write about Hackmatack; the Friends group is a major reason *why*.



Newest addition to the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge (David Holman for Openlands)

✿ **U.S. Dept. of the Interior – National Park Service**

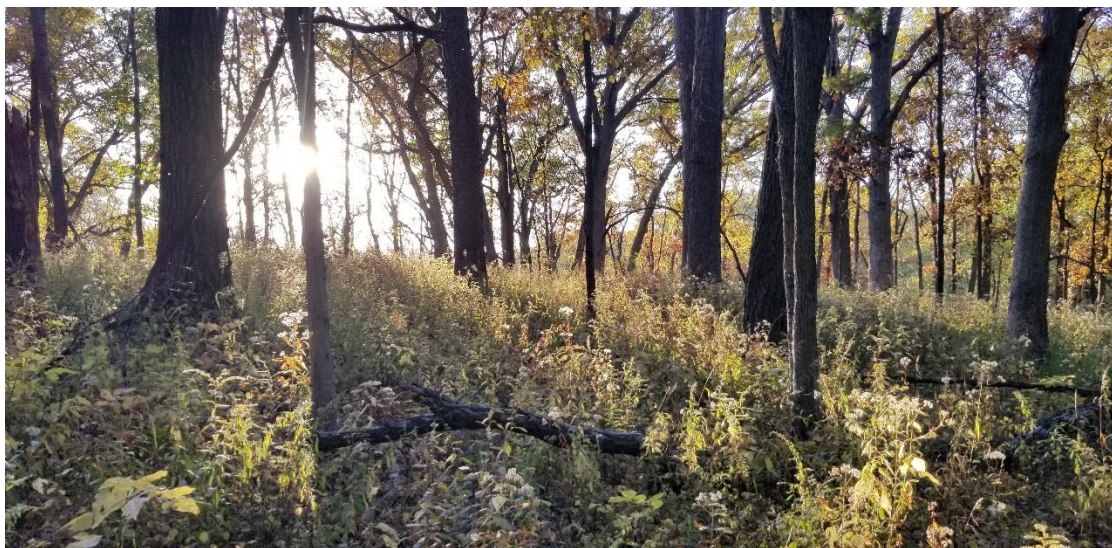
67) We close on a high note, and one many years in the making. At the very end of 2022, the National Park Service – by an act of Congress – established the New Philadelphia National Historic Site in central Pike County two miles east of the city of Barry as a National Park. New Philadelphia is the first town known to be officially registered by a person of African heritage. Frank McWorter – a former slave who had purchased his freedom and later purchased that of 16 family members – founded the town in 1836. Selling plots to both blacks and whites, this integrated community flourished until, as was the case with numerous towns of the era, it declined following the construction of a railroad in the late 1860s that bypassed the municipality. The town was disestablished in 1885, and by the mid-20th century all traces above ground were gone. The land beneath the surface however still harbored remnants of this groundbreaking community, and for years now the New Philadelphia Association, Philadelphia Land Trust, and The Archaeological Conservancy have been both excavating the site and bringing its story to both a local and national audience. Last year marked a culmination of sorts, as the Association formally deeded to the Park Service 22.3 acres that it had purchased and cared for in anticipation of this day.



Illinois Beach State Park (*Melissa Grycan*)

Policy, Restoration, and Management

I'll let you in on a secret. Though I spend most of this report discussing newly protected lands, *this* is my favorite section to write. As I've noted previously, public policy has an immense impact on every other topic I have the pleasure to opine on. Restoration and management of our natural refuges create the vibrant ecological tapestries that so many – including myself – envision when we speak of such places. And hey, it's a nice change of pace to do some long form narratives on a wildly diverse set of projects and topics. And *that* seems as good a place as any to stop blathering and get into the meat of things. So let's do that, shall we?



Diana Krug

- ✿ About thirty pages ago, I went on at some length about a 40-acre square of a parcel acquired by **The Wetlands Initiative** (TWI). Oddly enough, this same geometry is also central to the second major TWI project that I have occasion to discuss, this one in cooperation with **The Nature Conservancy** (TNC). Square Marsh is part of an expansive tract owned by the Illinois International Port District in Lake Calumet on the far south side of Chicago. And for my entire life (and likely then some) the place has quite literally been sequestered behind fences topped with razor wire.

Wetlands ring a shallow body of brown, muddy water dotted with islands, many of which are basically concrete slabs colonized by the occasional weed. The shoreline is ringed with phragmites and what passes for a lake filled with ~~carp~~ [copi](#) (as readers of my 2022 report will recall). The land once looked much, much different. What today is sandwiched between roads and a golf course was, as recently as the mid-20th century, part of the now much diminished Lake Calumet (so was the golf course, which gives a sense as to the scale of the change).

Ignored or dismissed by many, other wiser heads saw opportunity – an opportunity to bring part of the historic lake back to vibrant life. Several years back, TNC and Audubon Great Lakes began working with the Port District to explore options for this

long-neglected space (180 acres in total, of which ~140 is wet), a partnership that culminated in '22 when the District board approved a new master plan which specifically called for restoring the Marsh.

TWI already had a good amount of experience with and knowledge of the site, so the Initiative was brought in to craft a comprehensive restoration plan for the property. The first phase of that plan began this year just passed, and man is it ever something. An ancient water control structure so old it's probably fit for the Smithsonian will soon be replaced, the phragmites and buckthorn covering the marsh's shorelines and islands are being excised, the first generation of native vegetation introduced, and the ~~canopy~~ ^{canopy} are soon to be eliminated. And that's just *phase one*. Moving forward, the shoreline and portions of the open water floor will be re-contoured to expand the hemi-marsh habitat that's the focus of much of the restoration efforts, and some of the slag, concrete, construction rubble, and I don't want to know what else that were dumped into the land decades ago will be removed.

To top everything off, ecological restoration is a good in and of itself, but Lake Calumet is in the middle of what is – by any definition you choose to use – the largest urban agglomeration for at least 400 miles in any direction. It's also in the middle of what historically have been some of Chicago's most neglected neighborhoods. Providing public access to the restored marsh thus goes beyond the "good idea" realm into that of a moral imperative. And the Port District did not disappoint. Complementing the still ongoing restoration, the local government has finalized plans for a multiuse trail running from the Pullman neighborhood in the west, across the lake and restored marsh, and through three Chicago Park District properties that have themselves come together over the last decade, all the way to the Calumet River in the south.



Clearing buckthorn. Lots and lots of buckthorn. (TWI)

✿ There are likely few if any readers of this report who aren't at least passingly familiar with the peerless work of the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation**, if for no other reason than I have occasion to name drop them in these pages at least a dozen times each year. Not only has the Foundation provided funding support for the acquisition or easement of quite literally tens of thousands of acres, but their stewardship and capacity building programs were second to none. Over the course of a quarter century, ICECF grew to become the preeminent conservation funder in the state, spearheading some of the most celebrated initiatives and achievements in Illinois conservation (they also, in conjunction with the Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation and the Illinois DNR funded my creation of I-View, as well as the expansion thereof so, to all involved reading this, please accept my very personal and heartfelt thanks.) As the year closed, so too did the Foundation close its own doors, but not before making one final, rather prominent grant; of \$47 million to the **Prairie State Conservation Coalition** (PSCC) to continue the programs it developed and deployed to such great effect.

PSCC will continue all three of those programs that have garnered so much attention in these pages over the years; grants for land protection (both fee acquisition and conservation easements) will be awarded in 2025, while the stewardship and capacity building programs will relaunch next year. All grants will be funded from returns on the original principal, which will remain largely untouched; this means that by necessity the grant programs will be less prolific and thus more competitive than was the case when they were under the Foundation. PSSC will prioritize the support of minority organizations and more generally support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across the conservation space. As was the case with Illinois Clean Energy, proposals from both 501(c)(3) and local government agencies will be welcomed.

✿ I've spent several years in these pages documenting with some relish the development and implementation of a grant program run by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources that provides support to nonprofit land trusts for the restoration and management of lands enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system. Created by the legislature and administered by the IDNR, it was one of a kind. Until it wasn't. And *that* was quite the surprise.

It really shouldn't have been though. The [Healthy Forests, Wetlands, and Prairies Act](#) was born of the recognition that when you're contending with an issue as immense as climate change, mitigating the problem is going to require drawing upon a resource that's equally immense – the land itself. And this was the genesis for a legislative push to support state agencies, local governments, nonprofit land trusts and other conservation related entities in efforts to restore degraded natural lands so that they can more effectively remove and sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The program was developed with the support and assistance of *The Nature Conservancy* and the *IDNR* (as well as advocated for by the Illinois Environmental Council and PSSC), and is funded through an annually negotiated appropriation that was set for this coming year at \$1M. At least $\frac{3}{4}$ of said appropriation must be awarded to these varied organizations in support of eligible projects, with most of the balance devoted to the DNR's own restoration efforts.



One of those healthy forests. (*Diana Krug*)

So, what – suddenly attentive readers may be asking themselves – are these eligible projects of which I speak? Well, there are five different types: The first is a matching program for projects that endeavor to mitigate climate change through the restoration or management of native vegetation.

The second finances projects along roadways or in parks, forest preserves, other public land or private conservation lands to plant native trees and grasses that have been demonstrated to absorb carbon (yeah, I raised an eyebrow at that one too. I'm guessing that'll be interpreted to mean vegetation that has an above average carbon dioxide intake). Relatedly, the third finances stewardship of existing public and private preserves, including the removal of invasive or nonnative plant species.

The fourth is kind of a combination of the first three, funding regional teams tasked with planting native vegetation, excising *nonnative* vegetation, prescribed burning, and educational outreach, while the fifth revolves around the wider community, supporting education and marketing around local projects or steps individual can take to promote the growth of native, carbon dioxide removing vegetation.

I really like this one because it's exclusively focused on the often under resourced long-term *management* of natural lands. Acquisition is the bright shiny object that draws both support and attention (heck, it comprises the lion's share of this report each year, and in one way or another is the source of a lot of my annual income), but it's the restoration and care of these properties that make them worth protecting in the first place.

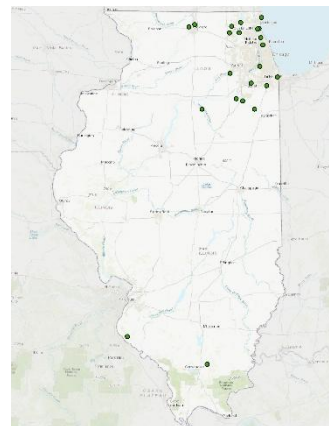
Restoration and care that this grant program makes possible. Well done, Illinois legislature. Well done indeed.

✿ Speaking of the **Illinois Environmental Council**, this is an organization that is without peer in the realm of public policy. I typically mention a few of their higher profile successes each year, but this humble report can't do justice to the breadth of the organization's work, as detailed in their own [annual report](#) that I strongly encourage anyone interested in legislative initiatives take a look at. It's not long, and summarizes their lengthy accomplishments and projects in a writing style that's blessedly *a tad* more succinct than mine.

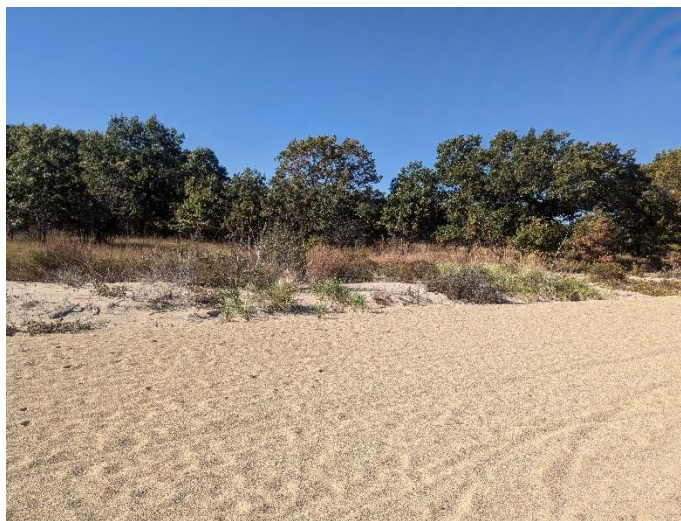
✿ On the subject of the aforementioned but heretofore unnamed **Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship** program that provides support to 501(c)(3) organizations for the restoration and management of lands enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system, program continued in fine form last year. Supporting the care of these privately owned natural refuges is pretty awesome since, as I summed it up last year, "a) these forests and wetlands, rivers and prairies [in the INPC system] represent some of the best of Illinois' natural heritage, and, b) a whole lot of these sites are on private land, this is generally considered a good thing."

Funded through the DNR's Natural Areas Acquisition Fund, the program last year catapulted to new heights via a record 14 grants totaling \$1M – a \$250K increase over the previous year and double the dollar value from just two years prior. Supporting ten organizations working on 34 individual Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves, the grants will be used among other things to purchase equipment, hire contractors, support staff, and improve management infrastructure. Given the ecological quality of most of the sites in question, from my perspective this partnership between state and private enterprise is unmatched in raw value.

✿ And now speaking of that stewardship program, one of its quite deserving grant recipients – a recipient of multiple grants actually – is a group I really should have mentioned before now. **Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves** (no, there's no definite article between 'of' and 'Illinois'. Yeah, I was surprised to realize that too). This is an organization that exists for the sole purpose of supporting the INPC system, primarily with literal boots on the ground. Truth be told, when they got started I assumed that it would at best be a small time operation that issued the occasional press release. I've been wrong about a lot of things – as a fair number of the stocks in my portfolio will attest – but man this has to be one of the biggest. Friends has grown rapidly, adding staff at a steady clip and, speaking to those grants, filling a real unmet need; the care of Illinois Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves.



See, protecting these sites is all well and good – heck, as I've previously explained, there's no higher form of protection – but fragmentation and invasive floral colonization being what they are, without management those high quality sites will degrade. Some slowly, some quickly, but degrade they will. Friends has built teams of volunteers who, in coordination with paid staff, not only arrest that decline but actively reverse it. In just the past year, as the map above shows, they've conducted work days at 22 separate sites, both in public and private ownership, and are continuing to expand. And that's on top of the real change they're effecting through advocacy and the like. The best example being, again, intensely site-specific, which is one of the things I really like about the organization. ATVers, in their endless quest to find unspoiled places to ATV, tore up a gravel hill prairie dedicated as a Nature Preserve – which most of my readers will know is a less than positive development. Joining forces with local neighbors, Friends staff and volunteers successfully advocated for fencing and signage that halted any further trespass. This was an example of a problem being identified and successfully addressed in really short order; how often does *that* happen? What we have here is a really effective group that's had an equally effective year.



Illinois Beach State Park Nature Preserve (*Melissa Grycan*)

- ✿ The **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** [tracked](#) over 84,263 acres burned during the 2023-2024 season (July 1 – June 30). That admittedly sounds like a lot, but context is key. How does that number compare with years past? It's the most land *ever* put to flame in a single year, that's how it compares. By several thousand acres.

Fire has been part of the ecological cycle for a solid 430 million years, and is thus essential to most common vegetative communities. This includes not only grasslands, where regular fires recycle dead vegetation and keep trees at bay (in addition, more recently, to beating back invasive imports that evolved in an environment where burns were less frequent), but also, to some notoriety, forests, where they similarly prevent the buildup of dry and eminently flammable vegetation that would otherwise accumulate until a spark – literally this time rather than figuratively – set the whole thing off in a massive, destructive blaze. Prescribed fire is possibly the most effective management tool in a box full of them, making this one of if not the most encouraging and important trends in land management today. *(Photo credit: Illinois Prescribed Fire Council)*



- ✿ You ever heard of PAD-US? It's a product of the US Geological Service – the Protected Areas Database of the U.S. – that endeavors to, well, be a database of all of the protected land in the U.S. Back when I first became aware of it, I was bemused to discover that said database didn't include a single property owned by the twenty Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts scattered across the state. That was completely understandable, as these mostly county-level entities are to the best of my knowledge found nowhere else in the country. That since corrected oversight was particularly egregious in the Chicagoland area, where the Districts are responsible for the *vast* majority of the region's protected lands.

This is all to say the Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts are huge players in the local conservation space, which is why last November was such a big deal, with the McHenry County Conservation District and the Forest Preserve Districts of DuPage, Kane, Lake, and Will *all* taking action to – for the first time since the 2000s – provide funds for land acquisition, development, maintenance, and restoration. Will's a special case that I'll get to in a moment, but the first four each passed referenda providing for that increased support. Of these, Lake County opted to present to voters a traditional bond referendum – of \$155M – which will be paid for through a slight increase to resident's property taxes until the borrowed funds have been repaid. \$65M will be directed towards land acquisition which by my admittedly back-of-the-envelope math will likely result in somewhere between 1,250-1,500 additional acres added to the District's holdings. \$30M will be devoted to restoration of said holdings, with the remaining funds devoted to building trails, redeveloping existing or opening new preserves, maintenance, and other various but important minutiae.

DuPage, Kane, and McHenry took a different approach to that of their neighbor; one pioneered by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in 2022. Instead of a one-off bond referendum, the three submitted for voter approval a permanent increase in the tax rate (in DuPage, of 0.035%, in McHenry of 0.027%, and in Kane of the comically precise 0.029163%) to provide a consistent, inflation-adjusted annual appropriation. All three will cost landowners about the same; ~\$10-12 for every \$100K in property value; it's just that the latter three are perpetual, while the former is term-limited. Also the same is what they plan to do with these new funds; from restoring their holdings to the milieu of prairie and forest, wetland and creek that once defined the region, to expanding trails and site access, to facilities management, and, in the case of the DuPage and Kane Forest Preserve Districts, to land acquisition. On that latter point, Kane expects the new funds to enable the addition of about 125 acres/yr – ensuring I'll always have something to write about, so my thanks to the good folks at the Kane County FPD – while in the more heavily developed DuPage, District officials have identified around 250 acres across the county that they hope to incorporate into the Forest Preserve system, at which point it'll be largely complete.



Random photo of the state capitol building because I wanted to add some color here. (*Creative Commons*)

Finally, not to be outdone in any way, the Forest Preserve District of Will County approved a \$50M bond, with half of that allocated for land preservation, and the remainder split roughly evenly between habitat restoration and the development of new trails and preserve amenities. Because the Forest Preserve waited until its previous bond – issued at a higher interest rate – was paid off before issuing this new one, residents will actually see their tax bill decline a bit, which is a nice trick. Among many, many [other things](#), the District aims to restore 800 acres of agricultural land in its portfolio to the natural vegetative communities the sites once hosted and enhance another 1,700 acres of existing but degraded natural areas. As importantly – and I promise this will be the last number I throw at you as part of this piece – they aim to acquire another 1,100 acres to further expand opportunities for human visitors and natural critters alike. ... Yeah, it was a busy November all around.

- ✿ OK, so this was legit my favorite project last year. Many reading this report have seen or at least heard of the [film](#) Monty and Rose and/or its sequel – documentaries about two federally endangered piping plovers that were the first of their species to nest within the Chicago city limits since 1948. Thanks to heroic work on the part of the IDNR, the Chicago Park District, the USFWS, and super dedicated volunteers, 2024 brought us a mid-season cliffhanger from The Next Generation era, as Imani – one of the hatchlings from the eponymous stars of The Original Series that ran for three

seasons from 2019-2021 – and its mate endeavored to successfully nest at the same beach from which it had hatched.

The plovers built their nest on a small rise a few inches above the surrounding sand flat.



On June 1 – not long after two eggs had been laid with two more on the way – *heavy* rain moved in and nearly inundated the whole structure. It survived, but barely...and severe storms were forecasted to roll through only two days later. What to do? One possibility was moving it onto a nearby sand dune, but dense vegetation made that unsuitable at best. They ultimately settled on a solution that wouldn't have even crossed my mind as being possible – raise the elevation of the nest itself.

There's a word for this, and "viable" is not it. (IDNR)

Right, the question then becomes, how do you do that when the thing is made of sand – a substance that to some notoriety is not on its own a particularly sturdy building material? Well, for starters, they went to some of the scrapes the pair had made and abandoned prior to selecting their nest site (unlike with humans, it's a buyer's market right now in piping plover real estate, so the birds could afford to be picky).

Experimenting, the monitors discovered that with wet sand and a shovel, the nest could be removed without damage, and sand added to the base to raise the whole thing up. So...they did that.

After receiving approval from the USFWS on June 2 and practicing on test sites around the beach on the morning of the 3rd because yeah, this project was conceived and came together *fast*, the team descended on the nest. They removed the eggs to safety, collected the assorted shells and pebbles the parent plovers had gathered to furnish their abode to keep them from being lost, and got to work. A five-gallon bucket with its bottom removed was placed over the nest cup to protect the structure. Secured in said bucket, the cup was removed using a shovel and placed to one side.



Nest in a bucket (IDNR)

The base was then built up somewhere between ten and twelve inches, whereupon the bucket & nest were placed atop, with gentle slopes of sand built around it to stabilize the thing. Those slopes along with the nest itself were subsequently watered, the latter to maintain its shape and the former to consolidate and pack the new additions. The eggs were then returned and a protective enclosure – removed to allow for the

alterations – put back into place. The entire process took 22 minutes, 22 seconds from beginning to end.



Storms over the next few days with winds topping 65 mph led to the exposed west side of the nest beginning to erode. The protective bucket made an encore appearance, with additional sand brought in to buttress the nest, capping it this time with a clay/silt mix from a nearby swale more resistant to erosion than the surrounding fine sand particles. Over the subsequent few weeks, the beach experienced multiple storm events that would've swamped the nest had it remained untouched. The climax of the story came on the 25th of June, in the form of a meteotsunami caused by a strong stormfront coming down from the north, generating a 2-3 foot wave that surged onto the beach. Within eight minutes, the waters began to recede. The incubating bird had never left the nest. *(Photo credit: IDNR)*

Ultimately, all four eggs hatched. Though three of the chicks eventually succumbed to causes as yet unknown, the fourth fledged and departed along with its parents last fall; a real win for this endangered species, and one that only came about because of the ingenuity and dedication of the team that watched over them from beginning to end. As if not more importantly, they pioneered a system that can be used to protect future nest sites, not only along the Chicago lakefront, but across the country.



The waters recede *(IDNR)*

2023 Revisited

It occurs to me that, statistically speaking, a time *should* come when, having successfully identified and expounded upon every land protection project completed over the previous year, I can consign this section to the electronic dustbin... That time is clearly not at hand. That's OK though, because I can think of few better ways to wend towards the conclusion of this expansive narrative than exploring a few more newly protected lands found across the state. Join me then if you would for a final look at 2023.

✿ Boone County Conservation District

Whatever the year, most of the entries in this section are the result of projects I had no reasonable way to know existed when writing the previous year's report. ... This is not one of those projects. I've got no excuse here.

In the summer of 2023, the Boone County Conservation District was the recipient of the most concrete affirmation I can conceive of the value it provides the community and the trust earned by its dedicated and expert staff – the donation, in the last will and testament of a resident, of 58.5 acres of farmland (60 acres gross) cut through by a channelized tributary of Mud Creek, itself a tributary of the Kishwaukee River and about midway between Belvidere and Marengo. While at present leased for agricultural purposes, the newly christened Brushwood Conservation Area will eventually be restored to native vegetation, taking its place among the District's diverse preserves.



✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

Right; you're tired, I'm tired, so this one is going to be quick. The District added one acre – almost to the square foot – on the northeast side of Lyman Woods in the Village of Downers Grove. In addition to hosting a residence, this wooded parcel has a good number of oaks and borders the existing preserve on a bit under 2.5 sides. The two parties closed on the sale in early December 2023 but, in a coordinated and successful effort to make me bemoan the injustice of the universe, the deed wasn't recorded until a few days into the new year, thus I didn't become aware of the transaction until well after last year's report had landed in your inbox. Yes, I know. I feel sorry for me too.



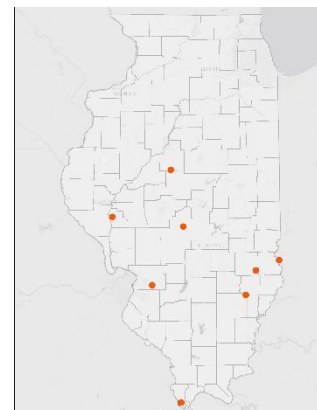
✿ HeartLands Conservancy

Another year, another HeartLands Conservancy wetland mitigation bank that slipped through the cracks when I was making my annual inquiries about new projects with which to inspire or bore depending on what you think about my writing style. Blame shouldn't be cast about though, because the Conservancy does *a lot* of these. In fact, so far as I'm concerned, they're the undisputed masters of the craft. This time, we're in the southeastern tip of Madison County exploring two adjacent conservation easements; one 33.1 acres, the other 7.4 densely wooded acres. Situated just north of the intersection of Sugar Creek – which forms the boundary between the two properties – and the Spanker Branch of the same as it runs through that riparian woodland that parallels the southeastern boundary of the larger of the two, the agricultural field will be restored to wetland, improving the health of the waterway and providing expanded habitat for some of the critters that call it home.



✿ Natural Resources Conservation Service

Some predictions are bloody well impressive; anyone who asserted that Nvidia would be double in market value this year and be the most actively traded stock in the S&P 500 has every right to crow. Other predictions – like that Generative A.I. is an unprofitable, unsustainable financial boondoggle that'll come crashing down (and mark my words it will or I will *eat* crow) are so blindingly obvious as to be almost unworthy of comment. Such is the case with my observation last year in discussing the one new easement acquired over the course of 2023 by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, in which I noted that *“the chance that this was really the only NRCS easement established in Illinois last year is materially lower than the probability that the upcoming presidential campaign will involve a reasoned, civil discussion of competing ideas and proposals, so check back next year because there is undoubtedly more to be said on the subject.”*



Well, guess what? 2023 ended up featuring an additional *thirteen* conservation easements protected through a variety of NRCS programs, across over a half dozen counties. These include a 30.6-acre property in Jasper County and a 161.2-acre parcel in neighboring Crawford that add to existing easement complexes. Then there's a 59.5-acre easement in Wayne County adjacent on two and a half sides to the IDNR's newish Fox Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area. Not to be left out, more isolated easements were established in Madison and Christian (156.1 and 67.1 acres) counties.

All of that is merely prelude to the big news. Anyone who didn't read my commentary on the work of either The Nature Conservancy or the NRCS last year at Dogtooth Bend, scroll up and go do that right now. I'll wait.

OK, welcome back. In 2023 the Service closed on nine conservation easements across the oft flooded expanse, taking in what for Illinois at least is a huge 2,247.3 acres which, yeah, by the way, made that the most productive year for public land conservation in the state since at least 2015 when I began tracking this stuff – which was itself then bested by 2024 thanks in large part to yet more work at this site. Credit to both the USDA and TNC for the planning and resources that have clearly gone into making this project a reality.

...Oh, and not to dive back into the weeds, but compounding my annoyance, and listed here for the sake of comprehensiveness and in case anyone ever tries to work out precisely where the numbers come from in that acreage chart that headlines this section of the report, there were *also* two additional easements from 2022 that the Powers That Be recently revealed to the world, one of 32.4 acres in Scott County, and the other, of 119.8 acres, in the aforementioned Dogtooth Bend – one of the properties in fact that was acquired this year by The Nature Conservancy. Also, another easement from that year that I previously reported as 39.3 acres has been revised to 38.2. And this, I promise, is the end of that.

✿ ParkLands Foundation

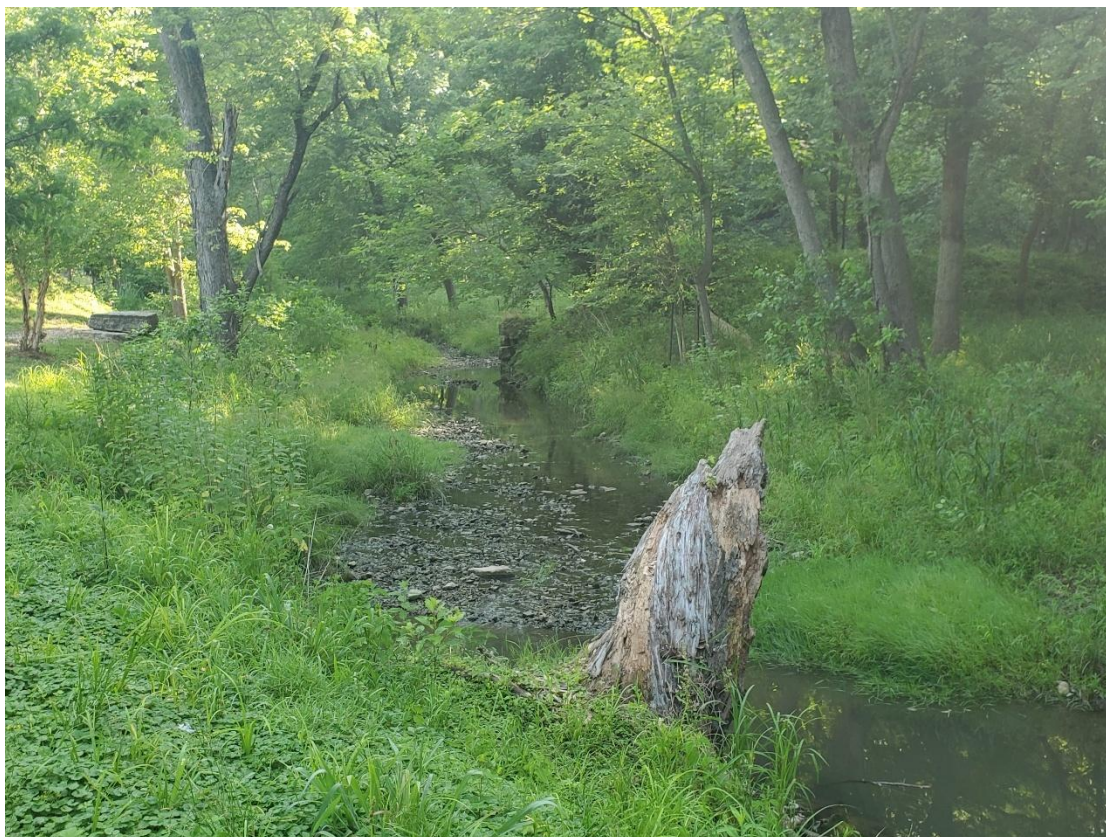
This is an unusual one that came to fruition right as the year closed. In fact, it's probably the only project of its kind that I've ever written about.

There's a word for that, but it's one of the two words I refuse to utter in these reports given that it's (ironically) so bloody well overused in the conservation sector, so you'll have to figure that one out on your own. Anyhow, the 49-acre McClure Preserve, located along a tributary of the Mackinaw River in southeastern Woodford County

was exchanged with two private landowners for a 56.9-acre property along the *actual* Mackinaw River, also in southeastern Woodford County. The two sites are a bit over three miles apart; both are mostly wooded with scattered open fields, but the new parcel has the advantage of lying adjacent on both north and east to the largest unit of ParkLands' 717-acre Chinquapin Bluffs preserve, into which it's been fully incorporated. As for the former preserve – itself adjacent to an expansive combination of parks and natural areas owned, under easement, and managed by the local municipality – it isn't destined to be turned into a subdivision. The land was transferred subject to a deed restriction that prohibits commercial logging of old growth timber outside of a limited building area, which itself is limited to ten acres on the more open, western half of the site that lies well away from the river tributary that flows north through the land.



On a more traditional note, just over a mile to the east of that aforementioned addition, visitors on their way to the Chinquapin Preserve pass an 80-acre farm that likely unbeknownst to them is destined to forever *be* an 80-acre farm. Just as was the case with their 2024 work discussed a couple dozen pages ago, this is a project that came to fruition through a partnership with *The Conservation Fund* and supported by, you guessed it, the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership Program and the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*. The land has been permanently protected via an agricultural conservation easement that takes in not only the farm fields, but a surprising amount of grass plantings along the interior waterways, adjoining a small manmade pond, and along the western and southern borders, the latter of which are enrolled in another NRCS program that I will not name here because two acronyms in one piece is quite enough, thank you very much.



Cynthia Kanner

Changes at the Top

There are no words I can offer that would adequately convey the impact or influence that **Ed Collins** has had on conservation in Illinois, nor the degree of my respect and admiration for both the man and his work. Prior to his retirement last year from his long-time role as the Director of Land Preservation and Natural Resources at the **McHenry County Conservation District**, Mr. Collins was responsible for some of the most visionary and successful restoration projects this state has witnessed over the last thirty-plus years.

One of the most prominent and far-reaching is a project I've waxed lyrical about in these pages several times over the years; the [remeandering](#) of the channelized Nippersink Creek in 1999-2001 (with a further stretch restored in 2014). I learned about the history of this initiative – the first time a river in the state had been remeandered at scale – on the first day of my first real job out of University, and have been enchanted with it ever since. He led efforts to establish the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge and has played a major role in its development since, been a guiding force in more regional organizations than I can name, mentored multiple generations of conservationists, and, recognizing that you typically have to, you know, own the land before you can restore it, at first guided and eventually oversaw the septupling of the MCCD's land holdings from ~3,000 acres in a few scattered sites to the over 25,000 that this regional powerhouse manages today. The scale of Mr. Collins' accomplishments is, in my experience, matched only by his humility and generosity of spirit. His is a legacy both professional *and* personal that will be long remembered, and that I for one will be forever grateful.

The incomparable **Todd Strole** has taken on the role of Assistant Director of the **Illinois Department of Natural Resources**. I'm not typically one to make broad generalizations, but it's an immutable fact that any and everyone reading this is immensely fortunate that this is the case. Mr. Strole has years of experience with the Department, most recently as the Director of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission where – and I speak from experience – he did an exceptional job guiding, advocating for, building and *leading* the organization. He has a similarly extensive history in the nonprofit sector, having spent over a decade working with The Nature Conservancy on floodplain management. Put simply, there's quite likely no one more qualified for a job that involves daily working with an endlessly diverse group of stakeholders and conservation professionals.

He takes the reins from the inimitable **John Rogner**, for whom this was his *second* stint in the role, coming out of retirement after a successful interregnum with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service where, among many other duties and accomplishments, he served as the acting director of the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge and brought the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge & Conservation Area into being. Mr. Rogner held leadership roles at the state or federal level for my entire career, effecting positive change both large and small, and it was in those roles and through those efforts that he became something of a legend to the new kid. I'm immeasurably fortunate to have learned from his work and example; a sentiment I know is shared by quite a few.

I end this section with a personal note of appreciation. At the close of the year, **Jenny Skufca** retired from her role as the Illinois DNR's Natural Areas Program Manager. Ms. Skufca is well known to many of my readers for her work across both Department and state, but what most do *not* know is that she had for a good number of years selflessly edited these reports, catching my mistakes (so very many mistakes) and bringing a fresh eye to the entire product. I'm deeply grateful for her time and generosity of spirit.

And with that, I have fantastic news; we're *finally* done! As always, thanks for joining me on this look back at the year that was. 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* conservation organizations 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.