

2023 Year in Review

Annual Report of
Land Conservation & Policy
Achievements in Illinois



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

by David Holman



About Prairie State Conservation Coalition

Prairie State Conservation Coalition is a statewide, not-for-profit association that works to strengthen the effectiveness of conservation land trusts 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, educational webinars, and training for conservation land trusts and agencies and advocates for strong statewide policies that benefit land conservation.

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.

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2023 – Year in Review

As 2024 begins to ramp up, it gives me great relief pleasure to present to discerning readers everywhere a brief overview of the many projects that came to fruition over the course of the year just past. I could try and write something profound here, but this thing is long enough already. That said, for those who just can't get enough of my verbose ramblings, the reports for 2019-'22 are themselves [all available](#) thanks to the wonders of modern technology with only a *wee* bit of post hoc editing.

This annual compendium is again coming to you in coordination with the good folks at the Prairie State Conservation Coalition. For those unfamiliar with the organization, scroll back up to the previous page for an excellent summary of their work. As I've written in years past, it's the support that the organization brings to bear that helps its members achieve so much that you need this doorstep-sized report simply to summarize it all. 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 to *2023 in Review*. What's on tap this year you ask? Good question. Over the next 60-something pages, we'll be taking a look at:

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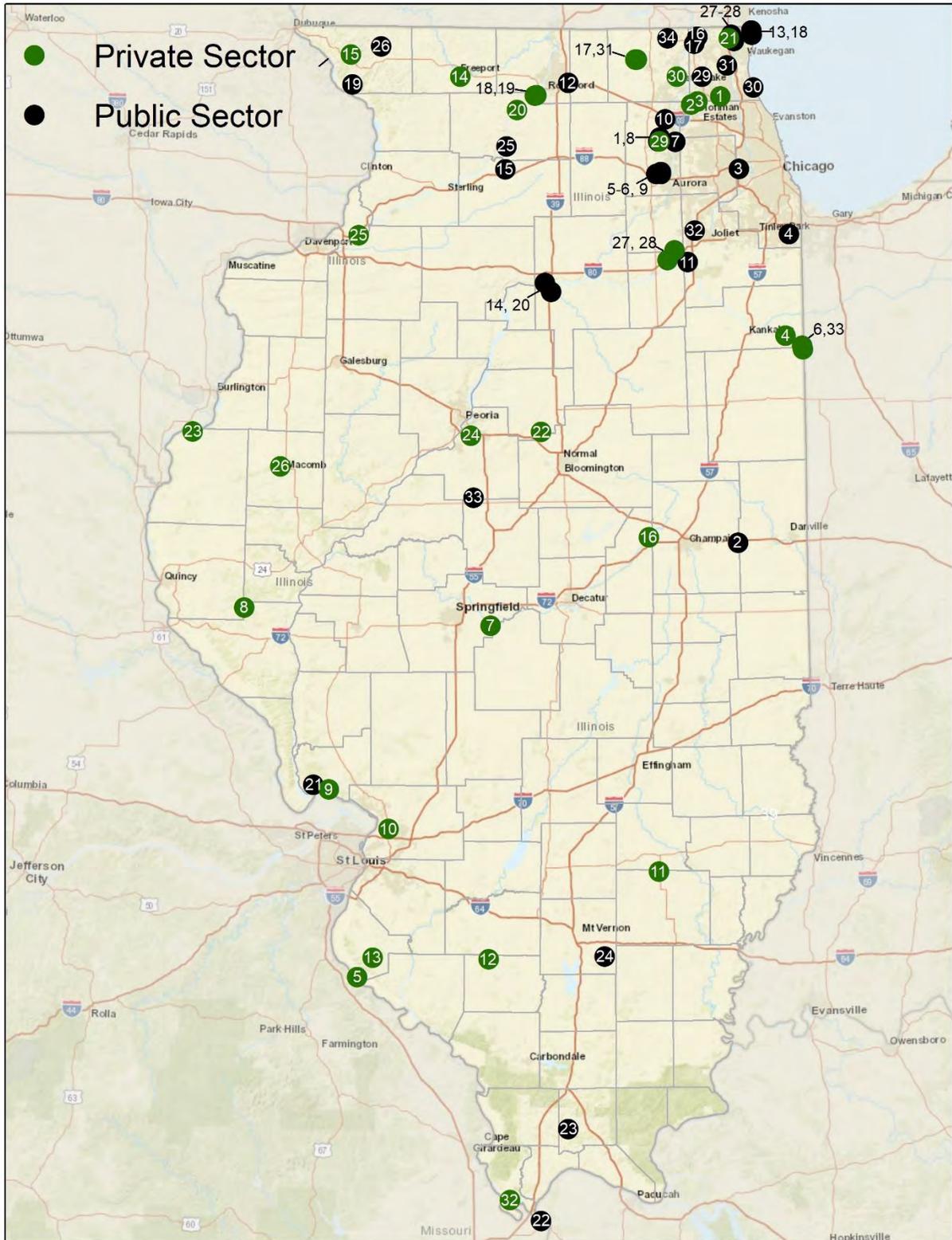


Southern Illinois prairie (*Cynthia Kanner*)



Wild bison calf with mother (*Bill Kleiman*)

2023 Land Protection Projects

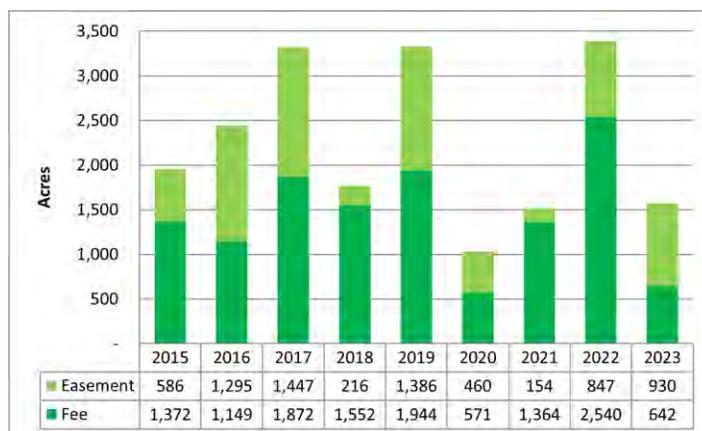




Private Sector Land Conservation

Following a frenetic 2022 that was the most successful year for private sector conservation since I began writing these reports (contrary to my assertion in this space last year that it was ‘merely’ near the top), last year was largely one of consolidation. What it was *not* is boring, with some really impressive projects across the state that collectively protected 1,572.1 acres – every one of which I of course describe in copious detail below – along with the return of some long absent faces and not one but two all new conservation groups.

I’m not about making people wait, so let’s get the annual reminder of how that all important graph you’re eyeing comes together taken care of so we can get to the fun part. As always, I discuss every land protection project that closed over the last year – which is why these things are so darned long every year! – but only include newly protected sites in the acreage totals. 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 not included in the graph so as to avoid double-counting, which I place right up there with talking in a movie theater as a mortal sin. Tangentially, (because I don’t have a better place to put this) 2023 saw the rightsizing of a few properties discussed over the past two years, with land trusts disposing of a collective 14.9 acres that are superfluous to the conservation needs of the sites. Wow. I just reread that paragraph. It almost put *me* to sleep, and I *wrote* it. Right then. Enough of that; let’s get to the good stuff!



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

✿ Barrington Area Conservation Trust

1) After a five-year hiatus from these pages, the Barrington Area Conservation Trust is back, and *how*. Nestled in the Village of Long Grove on the southern border of Lake County, a super dedicated landowner and his team have over the course of the last quarter century restored a 59.88-acre mosaic of sedge meadow, oak savanna, prairie, and a good dozen variations of the aforementioned communities, steadily adding to the site as new parcels became available. The highlight of the property – now forever protected via a conservation easement – is without question the sedge



High quality sedge meadow (David Holman)

meadow; home to a state endangered sedge known from less than a handful of sites across Illinois. Further south, the prairie is notable for a different reason. Once a horse pasture, the grassland has been so comprehensively restored and well managed that it now hosts a nomad bee that's typically only found in remnant prairies or *well* established restorations adjacent to said remnants – which this, I remind you, is not. Just really impressive all around.



2) 1930s Cook County wasn't exactly known for either its majestic forests or rolling topography – the former having given way over the previous century to the plough, and the latter having given way about sixteen millennia earlier to a glacier weighing several million tons. And yet by the end of the decade both were to be found on this residential property in what's now the Village of Barrington Hills. The topography was the easy part; the land just so happens to lie on a glacial moraine which, yeah, is kinda surprising the first time you see it. The forest on the other hand got a leg up from *the* social event of 1933 (no, not [that one](#)); the Chicago World's Fair. Once the festivities wrapped up such that the



My backyard does not look like this. (David Holman)

Powers That Be no longer needed all those darned trees that they'd imported, the landowner purchased and transplanted a whole host of maples onto the land, which is where they remain almost a century later. That unusual combo – along with a wholly unrelated but nearby open field and pond – are now protected from subdivision or development of any kind as part of a 16.1-acre conservation easement.



3) I've had more than a few occasions over the years to talk about ecologically vibrant lands that owe their preservation to that small coterie of benevolent individuals who donate their property to and for posterity. It's a big deal every single time, usually representing a financial commitment that can't be overstated. What then is to be said about a project that started with the exact opposite; not an environmental treasure, but rather a weedy, open field leavened with the occasional scenic buckthorn that was purchased with the express intent of restoring the property to its former glory *before* then dedicating the land to the entire community?

That's what we have here with the 4.8-acre Rieke Preserve in



Sandhill cranes enjoying the first-year prairie.

(David Stout)

the Village of Barrington Hills. Adjacent to BACT's Pederson Preserve, what was not two years ago a weed infested eyesore was transformed by a husband-and-wife team who worked with BACT and local contractors to turn that field into prairie, complete with benches, low-impact parking, and a walking path dotted with plaques relating the history of the village to residents visiting this maturing prairie located on the town's main street. That is one *heck* of a legacy.

✿ Community Development Corporation of Pembroke Hopkins Park

4) OK, so that is a (long) name that few of my readers are likely familiar with, but it's a welcome addition to these pages. The organization works in the Village of Hopkins Park and the wider Pembroke Township in southeastern Kankakee County, an area whose cultural and ecological legacies stand out even in a state with copious examples of each, and it's the celebration of the two that lie at the heart of this project, completed with the support of the *Illinois Clean Energy Community*

Foundation. Split into two parcels totaling 54.3 acres, the larger property is now in the process of being developed into a nature center that celebrates both the land – a black oak savanna that is one of the rarest ecological communities on the planet – and community.



✿ Ducks Unlimited

5) Illinois has more frontage along the Mississippi River than does any other state in the Union. It's a huge commercial and ecological corridor, and the focus of a plethora of programs and initiatives from the public to the private. And so it's more than a bit surprising that I rarely have occasion to speak of the river in these reports in anything more than passing terms.

That's not the case this year though, and we have birds to thank for it. Penitentiary Point near the southwestern tip of Monroe County probably has a fascinating history given its name. I however have no idea what that history might be, so let's get back to the birds. Because they're the focus of this ~202.3-acre (208.5 gross acres) conservation easement that stretches out from the banks of the river. Forested wetlands cover the vast majority of the property, through which runs the twisting Old Maestown Creek before it empties into Salt Lake Chute; a narrow channel branching off from the Mississippi, forming an island upon which the southernmost reaches of the easement lie.

Those semi-aquatic woodlands are habitat for a good number of migratory waterfowl, including neotropical birds that also breed in the area. Coupled with the land's probable hosting of several endangered bat species, this one's a welcome addition to the riverine conservation network along this mightiest of waterways.



Am I using a giant picture of the Mississippi so that I can devote an entire page to a project that I learned of on January 2 and in so doing avoid having to reformat this section of the report? Yes. Yes I am. (*Good Free Photos*)

✿ Friends of the Kankakee

6) It was something of a downer last year to, for the first time, publish one my annual reports *without* a piece devoted to the continuing land acquisition work of Friends of the Kankakee. Friends, as you will recall, is the singular force behind the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, and for almost 30 years has been assembling the future refuge largely within a platted but mostly unbuilt residential subdivision – one lot at a time.

This is the very definition of grassroots conservation, and I absolutely love it. Anyhow, to my eternal vexation, it turns out that I both could and should have written about Friends' acquisition work last year; I just didn't know it. Literally closing on the last business day of 2022 and not being recorded until the following month, the group added two parcels to their holdings collectively totaling an acre – purchased with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. Now, normally I'd put this in the "20xx Revisited" portion of these reports. But first – also to my annoyance – that section's already *super* long this year. Second and more importantly though, FOK continued their methodical building of this savanna refuge in 2023, acquiring by trade a 1.3-acre parcel (the western piece on the map at right) that takes in a good number of mature oaks, including a black oak woodland that lies deeper within the parcel. All this in exchange for a 1.5-acre tract further north that not only does *not* have a black oak woodland, but was in fact historically used for agriculture and never restored, such that it's not exactly a botanical wonderland. From where I sit, that's a darned good exchange.



There's a bunch of black oaks hidden back there. (*Friends of the Kankakee*)

✿ Friends of the Sangamon Valley

7) The wooded, 7.4-acre Merrill preserve is the newest addition to Friends' wide-ranging holdings. New it may be, but this small property in eastern Sangamon County nestled within a residential development will be quite familiar to the community's conservation-minded residents, as the preserve was long owned and managed by the Illinois Audubon Society. IAS is very cognizant of the fact that it's a statewide organization, with properties and projects from suburban Chicago to the Kentucky border. Friends on the other hand not only focuses on the greater Sangamon River area, they *specialize* in it, and have for over two decades. With the resources and expertise to give the forested tract the attention it deserves, both organizations recognized that the local group was the ideal home for the forested tract, and so it has come to be.



✿ Great Rivers Land Trust

8) Hey, remember last year when I wrote about how darned innovative Great Rivers is in developing new tools to protect our state's natural heritage and subtly implying that everyone should perhaps take some notes? No? Well, you're in luck, because they're back for a repeat performance. The land trust has once again partnered with a mitigation company that, among other things, specializes in leveling up the woodland habitat of the federally endangered Indiana and Northern Long-eared bats.



Contracting with the landowner, the private firm restores the site while simultaneously the land trust places the property under easement, all overseen by the good people at the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This year we head to northwestern Pike County on the border with neighboring Adams for 146 acres of forest that will be enhanced and then, through the Trust, permanently protected. It's not just forest this time either; in a nice touch, Fishhook Creek – a tributary of the Illinois – cuts through the southwest corner of the site, with its own tributary flowing in turn from east to west through the wooded landscape. A neat project on its face, and a model for anyone paying attention.

9) There are times when the value of a newly acquired property is complex or nuanced, necessitating a lengthy explanation on my part... This is not one of those times.

Forest is good. Unfragmented forest is really good. Protecting more of an almost 2,000 acre unfragmented forest on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River? Now that's just the *best*, and the best is what we have here, with 16 acres



Snake habitat (*Alley Ringhausen*)

of mature oak/hickory forest – part of a complex of publicly and privately protected lands east of Grafton in Jersey

County and acquired with support from *The Conservation Fund*. The property is immediately adjacent to a 333.9-acre GRLT preserve to the west and the 418-acre Palisades Illinois Nature Preserve (which, I will note, was dedicated by GRLT) to the south. Oh, also, both adjoining properties have documented sightings of the state threatened Timber Rattlesnake, with one hosting a hibernaculum, so you're not exactly risking much on a wager that the reptiles similarly make their home in these wooded environs. This one's a clear win all around.



✿ HeartLands Conservancy

10) Let's be honest here. That aerial photo to the right didn't exactly fill you with confidence that you were about to read of something important, let alone exciting. I mean, it's what, an open field, a few wooded pockets that're probably junk, and some algae-infested ponds, all surrounded by a rail line, local roads, and a frigging interstate, right? You probably figured I was about to try to ascribe value to some putative municipal park or something similarly forgettable. If so, joke's on you, because you're looking at what's easily one of the top three most important land protection projects of the year.



Why? Because the [Illinois Chorus Frog](#) *is back* y'all. Several times over the last few years I've discussed the establishment and expansion of a ~16 acre preserve in the City of Edwardsville that complements an adjacent DNR property and protects the diminutive – and state threatened – amphibian. Requiring a mixed sand prairie and wetland ecosystem, that unusual combination means the frog is equally sparse on the ground. Well, what looks from the air to be a boring, isolated Field of Nothing is in fact a sand prairie (next to a small sand savanna), and one that as it happens is only about half a mile north of the two aforementioned preserves.

We're looking here at 41.3 acres of prime habitat with a well-established population of the good *Pseudacris illinoensis*. As such, it will not be a surprise to learn that establishing the preserve – dubbed the Knoll Family Wildlife Sanctuary – was a major collaborative venture in the truest sense of that phrase. The landowners generously and selflessly offered to donate a significant portion of the property's value, bringing the project from dream into achievable reality. To make that reality manifest (take a deep breath and get ready for me to stop dropping names and terms like there's no tomorrow), **The Conservation Fund** provided grant funding through a partnership with the **Illinois DNR**, which in turn leveraged invaluable support from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation** – all facilitated by the designation in 2022 of the new Poag Terrace INAI site of which the Sanctuary is a part and which includes funding to restore the entire property. There was *a lot* of interest around this one – and it's easy to see why.



The star of the show. (Peter Paplanus –
Wikimedia Commons)

11) There is no one – and I do mean *no one* – in Illinois with more experience and expertise in managing wetland mitigation banks than HeartLands Conservancy. I mean heck, they closed on seven of the things in 2022 alone. Last year was no different, and they started with a 111.5-acre conservation easement along Raccoon and Camel Creeks at the northern tip of Wayne County. The latter flows into the former, with both eventually merging with the Little Wabash. Open fields cover much of the property, with most of the balance being in agricultural production – both of which make the land perfectly suited for the restored wetland that will soon stretch across the land.



Marsh milkweed. Because it grows in wetlands, we're talking about wetlands, and I need to eat up some white space. (*Diana Krug*)

12) Following up their work in Wayne, HeartLands closed out the year by turning their attention to Swanrick Creek in far northwestern Perry County. Shot through with four separate tributaries (both channelized and natural) of the nearby waterway, this 96.5-acre easement is a mix of forest and soon-to-be-converted agricultural fields that's very specifically designed to take in each of the varied waterways. On the subject of that easement design, more eagle-eyed readers might be wondering why a lot of the boundary consists of dozens (and dozens) of interconnected semi-circles. And the answer is...I have no idea. It's a mystery to all, as HeartLands generously agreed to take on the vital role of ensuring the future mitigation bank is protected from development after the boundary had already been established. Sure was a pain to map out though.



✿ Illinois Audubon Society

13) Parents have to pretend that they don't have a favorite child, but I do not, so can freely trumpet the awesomeness of the 43.7-acre Alfred & Joanna Anesi Wildlife Sanctuary – named in honor of a couple whose generous bequest funded much of the preserve (also, sidenote for my sister. Mom and Dad lied. I'm the favorite). So, here's the thing. In 2013, back before I started writing these annual missives, the land trust Clifftop acquired over 530 acres of sinkholes and agricultural fields surrounding the Illinois DNR's 27.7-acre Fogelpole Cave State Natural Area.



Fogelpole is the largest cave in the state, and 51st largest in the nation. It's also virtually undisturbed – for decades visited only by a local resident who, beginning as a teenager in the 1940s and continuing for decades after first explored on his own and then subsequently led all scientific expeditions into the depths, including mapping the cave's eight miles of accessible passages and conducting some of the earliest dye-tracing delineations of its groundwater recharge area.

That recharge area is why Clifftop's work was so important, and why this IAS preserve is equally invaluable. It's also the reason I was *so* psyched to learn of it. See, Fogelpole is a karst cave, created by the slow dissolution of limestone rock, creating caverns fed by



water from a plethora of sinkholes that also conveyed the water from which the cave was formed in the first place. That cave and others like it present pretty unusual conditions; complete darkness, constant temperature year-round, high humidity and, because of that whole complete darkness thing, really low energy inputs. This is an environment that breeds highly specialized animal species that are often found almost nowhere else. In addition to being the largest, Fogelpole is also the state's most ecologically diverse cave, hosting a multitude of threatened and endangered species (and hosting 18 species identified as globally rare), including the Indiana, Gray, and Northern long-eared bat – all on the federal endangered species list.

(Photo: Debbie Newman and IAS board member Tharran

Hobson investigating inviting hole in ground leading to cave - IAS)

Since all the water – and, for that matter, inputs of almost any kind – flow from the surface, managing what goes on up there is both a key challenge and immeasurably fantastic opportunity. Think of it this way; the cave is fed by hundreds (if not thousands) of sinkholes large and small. Pesticides, herbicides, trash – anything applied or dumped onto the nearby land will eventually find its way into the extensive cavern. The recharge area defines the boundaries within which water, nutrients, and any bad stuff will eventually flow into the cave, versus that which will find its way to other locales, be they subterranean or terrestrial. OK, so that was a long way of getting to the main point: this means that protecting the recharge area protects *the entire cave ecosystem*. Like,

the whole thing. All of it. You're controlling the inputs into an otherwise closed system. This has fascinated me since I read [this article](#) in 2016 about some dedicated and talented folks mapping the cave that also includes a map delineating the boundaries of the recharge area. Ever since, I've been asking myself why the heck is this not Priority 1, 2, and 3 when it comes to land acquisition? Well, turns out the experts never let their eyes off the ball, because the new preserve is squarely within the area draining to the cave. This not only prevents future degradation or development of the land but, as with the 2013 project promises to improve it, as agricultural fields are transitioned to forest and prairie.

The story of how the preserve came to be is itself an exciting tale that I could've led this whole piece with. Last summer the DNR received notice that the land would be sold at an online auction. In less than a month. What to do? Call the Illinois Audubon Society, that's what. After a hastily convened two-hour discussion, the Society's Board agreed to authorize a bid. A few days later, crowded around a laptop, all present were thrilled when the land trust emerged victorious after over an hour of bidding. Upon contacting the auctioneer to make arrangements for payment, they learned that nope, you did *not* in fact win the property, because there was a reserve (a minimum value for the item being auctioned) that was not met. Additional negotiations ensued, a final value agreed upon, and the deal was done. And, as I think we can all agree, *what* a deal it is.



What lies beneath? (IAS)

✿ Jane Addamsland Park Foundation

14) It's something of an understatement to note that the landscape of Illinois has changed just a tad in the last 200 years. At the dawn of the 19th century, Stephenson County lay at the transition between the great prairies of the Midwest and the vast oak forests and savannas of Wisconsin. Nearly all of that prairie was rapidly turned over to agricultural production. "Nearly" is the operative adverb there though, for scattered remnants remained. Freeport Prairie in Stephenson County is one of them. Lying along a steep bluff and so unsuited for agricultural production, this 5.1-acre grassland hosts little and big bluestem, prairie dropseed and side-oaks grama, Indian grass and prairie brome. It will come as no surprise that the entire prairie has been a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve for over 45 years.



A 0.57-acre addition off the northwest corner of the site...has none of those plants. It's a (Kentucky blue) grass field. And that matters not even an iota. Buffering is the name of the game here, and the parcel does just that, providing the first and only such bulwark in an area otherwise highly developed. That's a valuable service, a sentiment shared by

both the Jane Addamsland Park Foundation and the Natural Land Institute, which partnered to see the parcel incorporated into the preserve. NLI helped cover the costs of acquisition, with the Foundation taking on ownership and the responsibility to both restore and manage the property – management that will include parking for visitors and signage highlighting this rarest of community resources.

✿ Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation

15) Illinois is home to 14 Forest Preserve and 5 Conservation Districts of various sizes. These public (and publicly funded) organizations are largely responsible for the bulk of the often significant protected natural lands in the counties in which they've been established, and similarly take on the task of providing outdoor recreational opportunities for their residents. Someone new to the state would be justified in presuming that one of those 19 districts was to be found in Jo Daviess County.



Justified, but wrong. Because while the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation stewards or otherwise protects thousands of acres – so much land in fact that it would be in the top half of the list if it were one of those public districts – it is *not* a public agency, but a private land trust; a land trust that's not only taken on the responsibilities of its public brethren, but succeeded wildly in so doing.

Case in point, the 260.2-acre (262.9 gross acres) Avery-Berlage Homestead conservation easement, in the middle of the County overlooking U.S. Highway 20. The property is adjacent to a ginormous residential community, the developers of which sought – repeatedly, over multiple years – to purchase and add the site to their mega project. Refusing every offer, the owners instead kept the property in the family, ultimately leading to the donation of the easement ensuring the land would remain forever open.

The highlight here is unquestionably the woodland on the western end of the property. This mix of mesic and dry-mesic upland forest interspersed with scattered dolomite outcrops is home to the state-endangered butternut tree, which is reason enough to rank this high on the list of last year's conservation successes. Wholly independent of



Rolling grassland (*Jim Johannsen*)

the woods, the property is also cut through by a tributary of Long Hollow Creek – itself a second-order tributary of the Apple River that plays such a central role in much of the Foundation's work. Livestock pasture and former agricultural fields that have been converted to managed grassland (on which are found a number of rather rare grassland bird species) parallel the waterway as it flows south, with a small agricultural field rounding things out. Just another day in the office for the good people at JDCF.

✿ Land Conservation Foundation

16) I don't think it's a stretch to assert that the Sangamon River is a central organizing feature around which conservation efforts have revolved for decades. I mean, if I gave you an otherwise blank map, you could quite effectively chart the river's course by the string of preserves – public and private – that lie along its banks as it flows across the state towards the Illinois.



Both the river and its ecological importance were intimately familiar to the recently passed owner and namesake of the newly christened Feller Woods, donated in his memory. The 21.3-acre floodplain forest hugging the Sangamon's eastern bank – southwest of the Village of Mahomet near the Piatt and Champaign County border – is part of a larger forest stretching to the east, anchored at



Bluebells at Feller Woods (*Fran Harty*)

the opposite end not only by a County Forest Preserve but also by a second Foundation-owned site discussed way back in the 2015 edition of this report. Want more conservation goodness? Over 50 acres directly to the south are permanently protected in an easement as part of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. What we've got here is a fine addition to a vibrant conservation scene; one I'm quite looking forward to revisiting in the years to come as it continues to grow.

✿ McHenry County Conservation Foundation

17) A couple years back I regaled readers with the story of Camp Lakota in rural McHenry County, west of the Village of Woodstock. Most of this former Boy Scout camp was sold to the Foundation, while the final piece was protected just last year and is discussed later in this section. But that's not what we're here to talk about...OK, yeah, well, it's kinda what we're here to talk about, but only tangentially. And that's because we're moving to the east, expanding a property that'll eventually be deeded to the McHenry County Conservation District with an unrelated 40-acre addition featuring oak savannas that transition to kettle marshes interspersed with agricultural fields. Acquired with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the land adds both scale and depth to the future preserve. Couple that with protecting more of the savanna and bringing in some quality wetlands? I'll make the bold call to declare this a very good thing.



✿ Natural Land Institute

18-19) A mature oak-hickory forest blankets much of the Lind-McGeachie Preserve on the southern outskirts of Rockford. That's valuable on its face, but what makes it really valuable is the nearby presence of the Northern long-eared bat, which calls such forests home. Hit exceedingly hard by a fungal infection over the last fifteen years, the bats were listed as federally endangered less than a year ago. And that in turn makes *two* forested additions to the site – a 36.1-acre tract in the east, followed by a 19.8-acre parcel to the west – both acquired with the support of the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – all the more impactful. First featured in these pages in 2020, as the millennium dawned the preserve, now nearing 110 acres, totaled less than a dozen, so this is quite the rapid – and timely – growth.



Now, normally, that'd be that. There are a lot of projects to cover in this thing, and how do you top protecting habitat for an endangered species? By moving from the air to the life aquatic, that's how. Because through that forest runs Silver Creek; a tributary of the nearby Rock River and namesake of a second NLI property only a quarter mile to the north. A survey of the waterway in that northern preserve a few years back yielded quite the surprise; the state threatened Mottled Sculpin. And not just one or two of the benthic-loving fish, but more than the surveyor – with decades of experience – had *ever* seen in one spot. “Two for the price of one” is a horrifically overused phrase, but never has it been more apt than here.



Prime bat habitat (NLI)

✿ Ogle Natural Areas Alliance

20) A few years ago – unbeknownst to me – the Byron Park District picked up a picturesque parcel along the shore of the Rock River. It's that green area on the righthand side of the map that your eyes just drifted over to. To the west of this, one could spy the wholly unrelated Byron Forest Preserve District's Mill Creek Wetland. Between the two? 14.3 acres of wooded wetland that was



Ogle Natural Areas Alliance

very much *not* guaranteed to remain that way. The good people at the Ogle Natural Areas Alliance did not think that a particularly acceptable possibility, a sentiment shared by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, with which the Alliance worked to preserve this wooded waterfront that now physically connects Park and Forest into one contiguous whole.



✿ Openlands

21) I have to come up with some interesting framework or at least organizing principle around which each of the project descriptions in this report are written. Hey, it's either that or a hundred bullet points of insipid pabulum, and no one wants that. Anyhow, inquiring minds might reasonably speculate that my focus for this 29.1 acre preserve in northern Lake County might be the remnant oak-hickory woodland that over decades has expanded to cover most of the land, or maybe the vibrant fen south of the property's residence...*Nope*. What makes this one special is so much more exciting than any of that, for this is not a new project, but the transfer of an *existing* conservation easement from one land trust to another! Yes, I'm a very strange person. We can all acknowledge this.



OK, that aside, why is this so awesome? The Pohickory Preserve (the name is derived from an Algonquin word for the shagbark hickories that are common throughout the property) was gifted to a small local land trust in the mid-1990s on the condition that a conservation easement over the land be granted to the larger, more established Natural Land Institute. That made sense, because for many decades, NLI was one of the only land trusts in the state, leading over time to quite the portfolio of properties such as this that are located far afield of their northwestern Illinois service area. The conservation landscape today is a lot more robust than was historically the case, so the Institute has over the last decade or so been transferring some of these far-flung easements to local partners. This benefits all involved; the local (or in the case of Openlands, regional) land

trust is well positioned to hold the easement and provide assistance to the landowner, while NLI can focus its time and efforts on its own service area. The end result is a more efficient land trust community all around. And *that* is an unquestionably good thing.

✿ ParkLands

22) Over the last four or five years, I've had a long running debate with a highly esteemed colleague over whether land conservation is better served by fewer but larger land trusts, or by numerous smaller, local groups. *I* think my arguments for the former are pretty darned compelling – on account of their being my arguments – but ParkLands had to go and mess with me last year by providing an even *more* compelling example in favor of the latter view in the form of a 9.3-acre tract in southern Woodford County. Completely covered by a healthy forest community, the eminently developable property was generously donated to the land trust by local supporters on the condition that it remain forever protected. It probably goes without saying, but in case not, this would *not* have happened without the attention and human connections that local land trusts bring to their communities. Like, there's not even an argument there. So, grudgingly, the point goes to my debating colleague. *Thanks a lot*, ParkLands.



✿ Prairie Land Conservancy

23) The Stony Hills Nature Preserve in northwestern Hancock County just south of the Mississippi River was PLC's first fee-owned property, and it remains one of its most important. The 186-acre site, almost all of which has been dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve is home to oak hickory woodlands, limestone cliff outcroppings, and restored prairie – including [Lisa's Showcase Prairie](#) which, well, take a look at the link, as I can't do it justice in this limited space. The Conservancy's first project of the year expanded the preserve through the addition of a 0.72-acre property. OK, so that's not huge, but as any realtor will tell you (over, and over, and over again) it's all about *location*.



And this parcel has it. In spades. Surrounded by Stony Hills on three sides, its addition both squares off and buffers the northwestern portion of the expansive site. And why you may ask is this new parcel surrounded by the preserve? Because it was the former homestead of the dedicated conservationist who donated Stony Hills to the Conservancy; there may well be no better way to honor her legacy.

24) NRCS's ACEP subsumed the FRPP, WRE, and GRP programs. ACEP-ALE, which took over the functions of the FRPP, is of course a wildly different animal from the CRP, both functionally and geographically. And don't get me started on those poor benighted souls who confuse CRP with CREP. At least the LWCF is straightforward, though you ever notice how those properties are so often ideal additions to the IDNR's INPC?



Yes, when it comes to acronyms, the conservation field gives the U.S. military a run for its money. We're getting reasonably close to a decade of these annual reports, so you'd be forgiven for thinking these august pages had seen it all. Forgiven, but wrong. Rejoice! For this year I've got a new one for you. The Regional Conservation Partnership Program or RCPP is a cost-sharing agricultural initiative from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that aims for measurable ecological improvements on and permanent protection of private lands. It's actually longstanding and highly effective, but surprisingly I've never had occasion to write about it <dramatic pause> *until now*.

What we've got here is a mix of agricultural fields and woodlands taking in a solid 97 acres, protected in partnership with *The Conservation Fund* and with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation* and the *Grand Victoria Foundation*. This is primarily an agricultural program, so let's start there. You're looking at a farm that's been in the same family for over 150 years; since 1868. As part of this particular project, the landowners sold a conservation easement that will be held by PLC. The easement will of course ensure that the land remains open for *another* 150 years – not an otherwise sure thing, as residential development is advancing towards the land on three sides – but also the proceeds will be used to repair a 1927 barn featured in Smithsonian Magazine that was literally purchased out of a Sears & Roebuck catalog (because that was a thing back in the day, by which I mean that Sears was apparently, at some point in history, a viable retail company). The natural areas, to my surprise, are themselves more than an afterthought. The headwaters of Lick Creek – a tributary of the Illinois – rise on the western edge of the site, and those scattered woodlands have been found to support nine native bat species. Good times all around.



A centenary farm and then some. (Dave King - PLC)

25) We head north now to Rock Island County and a 103-acre conservation easement sandwiched between I-88 and the Rock River near the border with the neighboring counties of Henry and Whiteside. For those of you who take perverse pleasure in my struggles each year to write something interesting about a farm field, I'm sad to say that you're out of luck. Because, to paraphrase quite possibly the most famous utterance of former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan this side of "irrational exuberance", I know you think you understand what you thought I was going to write about, but I'm not sure you realize that what you thought is not what I'm going to write.



Why is that? Because by the time you read this, that farm field will be well on its way to being a *former* farm field. The land, adjacent to a perennial tributary of Zuma Creek (itself a tributary of the Rock) is being developed into a wetland mitigation bank, more



Current farm, future mitigation bank
(Dave King - PLC)

specifically into a mix of emergent and forested wetlands, with the Conservancy ensuring the restored ecosystem is protected in perpetuity. On top of that, this property is the only site – easement or fee owned – currently held by a nonprofit land trust anywhere in the county, *and* it's also adjacent (well, across a street) from an existing NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program easement. And *you* thought I was going to have trouble finding something to write about with this one.

26) Shifting both scale and location, I invite you to join me for a visit to McDonough County on the outskirts of Macomb, a bit less than a mile east of the impressively restored Thistle Hills Land & Water Reserve. Here's the thing. The folks at PLC could clearly do one of those online MasterClass presentations on how to build and maintain an exceptional relationship with your local community, because this is an organization that is consistently sought out by landowners looking to donate not just easements, but entire properties. I'm serious; go browse the past editions of this report to see how often that happens. Such was the case once again last year with this 5.3 acre preserve along the east branch of the LaMoine River. "Generous" is a subpar adjective here, given how very developable is the property.



So, let's talk a bit about that land. Swamp white oak, river birch, and white oak hug the shoreline of the waterway that transitions to a hay field. To the south, beyond a driveway that crosses the preserve, you'll find another small woodland (bordering an admittedly boring grass field) filled with white, black, and swamp white oak, river birch

and honey locust, all shading a vibrant understory through which runs a short nature trail and bordering which is a well maintained two car garage that I imagine is a welcome bit of infrastructure for an expanding land trust. Revolutionary? Heck no. But legitimately valuable all the same.

✿ The Conservation Foundation

27) Right, so, this is a fun one on a couple levels. The Kendall County FPD's Aux Sable Springs Park is a small preserve situated along the eponymous creek. Unusually for the conservation space – or the public sector itself, for that matter – the property is co-owned by the Village of Minooka, where it's a part of the quite a bit larger 115.4-acre Aux Sable Park. See the difference? The municipal land doesn't include the word 'Springs' in the name. I'm certain this has never been the source of any confusion whatsoever.



Anyhow, that park is now set to expand thanks to TCF, in what is merely the latest of a long list of local parks that the Foundation has established or grown by partnering with local communities to purchase and hold property until the municipality can secure funding to acquire the land. And there really isn't any better example of either the skills they bring to the proverbial table nor the benefits of working through the nonprofit than this five-acre project.

See, 2023 wasn't the first time the village sought to purchase this strategically located piece of land. They first engaged with the owner several years ago, but negotiations went poorly. So poorly that the two parties somehow ended up in court, for reasons I can't begin to fathom. Needless to say, an agreement was not reached. Fast forward several years, and the municipality engaged with the Foundation, partly on the theory that negotiations might go smoother if the other party wasn't The Man. Go smoother they did, and TCF was able to negotiate an agreement that both set the purchase price at the actual appraised value (rather important, given that the village obviously can't pay over that) and incorporated what turned out to be farsighted safeguards to the purchase contract to ensure that both parties would adhere to its terms.

Not only is this future addition surrounded by the park (and also the Forest Preserve) on three sides, it borders the aforementioned Aux Sable Creek, which is both a high quality waterway and, as you might reasonably expect, a priority waterway for the Foundation. Like I said at the top, this one's got a lot to recommend it.



Hackberry Emperor (*Diana Krug*)

28) Jonesing for some more Aux Sable Creek? TCF has you covered, quickly following up their work in Kendall County by moving downstream to neighboring Grundy with a 19.7 acre wooded property midway between Minooka and Morris. Collins Run flows through the site before emptying into the larger waterway, which itself bisects the new preserve.



That's all good stuff, with just about anything we've just reviewed making the land worthy of the Foundation's attention. Thing is though, while it's not a universal truth, a lot of conservation is about scale; creating large, contiguous preserves, be it for recreation or critter habitat. So, you will not be surprised to learn that the property is adjacent to...nothing. There's nothing even particularly close. I mean, there *is* a DNR trail about two miles away, so I suppose there's that. What's up? This is where things get not only interesting, but inspiring.

See, this property came up for sale last year, whereupon it was purchased by two siblings who own several hundred adjacent acres before it could get snapped up by a developer.



They then worked with TCF, which subsequently acquired the land with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***. The pair jumped at the site because it's an integral piece (hey, longtime readers. Notice what word I *didn't* use there? I will *never* use that word in this report) of their vision of a protected corridor from Minooka to Morris along the river, perhaps one day including a trail connecting the two communities. To see that ambition

become reality, they plan to eventually donate their substantial holdings to the Foundation as a bequest. What you're seeing then is likely the inception of what'll become an expansive preserve; one that will continue to grow over decades through the support and effort of individuals and groups across the state – all thanks to the vision and generosity of two very special people. (*Photo credit: The Conservation Foundation*)

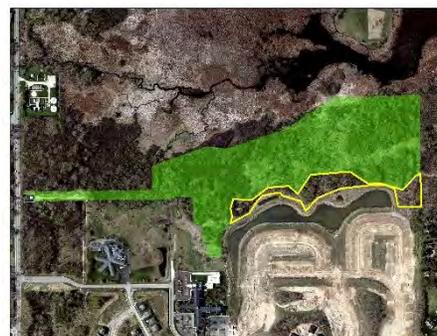
29) This isn't the first time we've discussed the partnership between TCF and the Campton Township Open Space District in these annals, nor will it be the last. No, really, that's not a prediction; we'll be back here again in like six pages. Anyhow, a few years ago and also six pages from now I wrote about an addition to the Township's Corron Farm preserve that the Foundation had pre-acquired, holding it until the local government accumulated the funds with which to purchase the land. Well, they did it again this year. Next door to the previous parcel. Even the seller is the same. Also the same, the 112.6 (net) acre property is largely in agricultural production, with the land likely eventually being restored to prairie and wetlands. I for one remain as pleasantly shocked by this initiative



as I was two years ago when writing of the first project. It just never occurred to me that there could be such a substantial opportunity for large-scale habitat restoration in such a rapidly urbanizing area, let alone *multiple* such opportunities.

✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

30) The Thunderbird Lake Preserve – on the border of the Villages of Crystal Lake and Prairie Grove – is...nothing special, to be honest. It's a by and large forested wetland a bit past its namesake's southern shore whose pièce de résistance is approximately one bajillion tons of European buckthorn*. What *is* special is how the preserve is being managed and restored; an initiative simultaneously really simple and surprisingly uncommon.



See, this is a decent-sized wooded property in a pretty urbanized area, leading a couple of enterprising community residents to observe that it offers otherwise sparse hunting opportunities to those so inclined. So, what'd they do? Offer to clear some of said buckthorn every year in exchange for exclusive hunting privileges. TLC staff are super busy with a *ton* of important sites across the County, so this is a real win-win for all involved. Anyhow, a new residential subdivision on the south side of the preserve had 5.6 acres of outlots buffered from the rest of the development that they forgot they still owned, and so gifted to the Conservancy to add to the now 50.2-acre site.

* I used to just say "buckthorn", but learned today that there's good buckthorn too. And not just good, but highly desirable. Like, wooly buckthorn is a state endangered shrub found in southern Illinois. Mind. Blown.

31) Two years ago I discussed a really nice property home to both an INAI-designated marsh and extensive remnant oak groves, inviting readers to check back in 2022 to learn about the project's next phase. Been wondering what that's all about? It took a bit longer than I anticipated, but wonder no more, for 40.06 acres of the larger 161-acre site – formerly a Boy Scout campground – was acquired by a conservation buyer who worked with TLC to permanently protect the land with a conservation easement that as it happens is also adjacent and serves as an addition to an existing conservation easement (also also, this is the same campground I touched on above when discussing the McHenry County Conservation



Foundation). I'm psyched to return to this site because there's so much more to talk about. Let's start with the oaks. The groves are dominated by white oaks, with occasional red oaks and shagbark hickory. Along with a stand of chestnuts, they create a healthy canopy that restoration of the understory will only expand. That's the upland. The lowland is quite cool as well. The palustrine wetlands found throughout the property are spotted with vernal ponds offering breeding sites for amphibians and

reptiles free of pressure from fishy predators. The ever popular in these pages state endangered Blanding's Turtle has been found trundling through multiple areas of the newly preserved land, probably on occasion tilting a reptilian ear to the songs of three different state threatened or endangered bird species that visit the property's majestic oaks and calm pools. See? I *told* you there was a lot more to talk about.



The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

✿ The Nature Conservancy

32) I have, on occasion, presumed that my knowledge of the Illinois conservation scene is reasonably comprehensive. I mean, that's kinda my thing, right? So what does it say that it wasn't until mid-December that I learned of one of the most ambitious and comprehensive conservation projects in at least the last twenty years; something that combines social protection and an economic lifeline with land preservation and restoration at a scale that makes Midewin look quaint – and has been under development since 2020? Hubris; it'll get ya every time.



Right, so, Dogtooth Bend is near the southern tip of the state, with the [alliterative shape](#) of the region formed by the twists of the Mississippi River shortly before it merges with the Ohio. This is therefore and unsurprisingly quite the low-lying area. As the linked graphic alludes to, that became both a huge geographic and economic issue in the late 2010s, with a breach of the Len Small Levee in 2016, and subsequent breaches the following year and in 2019 (again, see



This is not a beach. (TNC)

aforementioned linked graphic). These followed breaches in 1993 and 2011. And when I say “breach”, we’re talking near biblical-level flooding here people. Nor does the problem end when the waters eventually recede, for those currents bring with them tens of thousands of tons of sand that cover a lot of the flooded land.

As you can surmise, this consistent inundation renders the area largely unsuitable for the agriculture that's long defined the region. But that land is often a major part of someone's livelihood; it's not so easy to just call it a loss and move on (see also my reaction to my stock portfolio over the past year...). That's where TNC, working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, comes in. NRCS is offering landowners the opportunity to sell conservation easements under a couple of programs that we've discussed in these pages over the years. This at best marginal farmland will be removed from production, and the Service will begin restoring it to the mix of wetlands, floodplain lakes, bottomland hardwood forest, cypress/tupelo slough, and cane thickets that once covered the area – with the owners often planning to then lease the area out for hunting. Applications for easements covering over 7,000 acres have been received – more than half of those having incurred significant long-term damage from the floods. One of the first of these easements – that I know of at any rate – was actually briefly touched on in last year's report, though at the time I didn't realize that it was an element of this larger project.

And that's the context behind this 80.4-acre parcel. I've purposely overlaid it on an aerial photo taken in the spring of 2019, 'cause that really emphasizes the scale of the aquatic disaster. NRCS acquired an easement over both this property and a nearby 39.3 acre parcel in late 2022.* TNC has now acquired fee title to the property; under their stewardship the land will be similarly restored, and managed in concert with the nearby lands under easement to create a resilient natural landscape.

* This is info that wasn't added to their public databases until a few months ago, hence they weren't discussed in last year's report. Normally I'd write about the two properties in the "2022 Revisited" section, but I figure these particular sites fit better here.

33) It's a rare day that I name drop someone in this report. Generally speaking, at best doing so is boring and at worst distracting. For that reason, you'll have a lot of "generous landowners" and "dedicated staffs" sprinkled across these pages. Much like the AP Stylebook though, it's important to know the rules so you also know when to break them. And that brings us to the nearly 2,700-acre Kankakee Sands preserve, which expanded last year with a donation from Dr. Marianne Hahn of two parcels of 0.4 and 4.8 acres. Separated by just over two miles as the swallow (African or European) flies, both contain healthy, globally rare – and I do mean rare; like, more uncommon than native prairie rare – black oak sand savanna. Consequently, each is also part of an Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site, with the larger adjacent to a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve.



Dr. Hahn's efforts to save and restore this ecosystem are heroic in the truest sense of that word. Over more than two decades, she's methodically built and restored the nearby Sweet Fern Savanna Land and Water Reserve. More prominently, she has since its inception been the driving force behind Friends of the Kankakee – *the* organization responsible, through its purchase and donation of 66 acres of high quality upland oak

savanna, for the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area, and one that continues to assemble hundreds of acres of future additions to the Refuge piece by piece, and year after year.



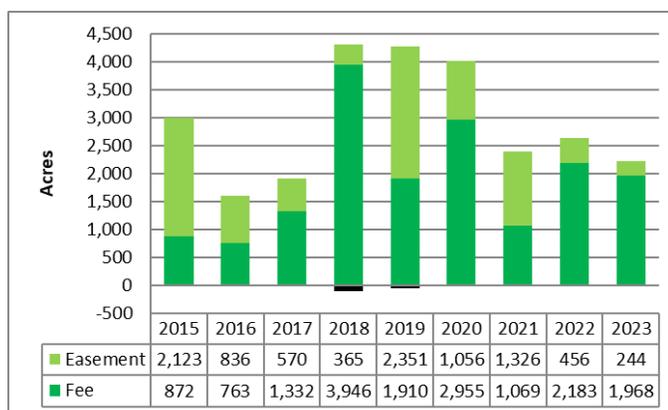
Kankakee Sands savanna (*Fran Harty*)



Public Sector Land Conservation

The first public parks in the U.S. date to at least the early 1700s. For over three centuries, an expanding milieu of public spaces have both drawn and inspired generations of visitors. Most of those reading this report likely had their first experience with the natural world in a public space; I know I did. From personal recreation to large scale conservation, the public sector is both central and essential. It's thus good news indeed that 2023 saw the continued expansion of Illinois' public spaces, with the protection of 2,211.9 acres* across the state.

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.



* This presumes that information on all of the federally-held conservation easements established over the year has been publicly released. That, as I write about below, is a courageous presumption. The number is quite likely to be revised upwards is all I'm saying!



Cache River State Natural Area (Cynthia Kanner - PSCC)

✿ Campton Township Open Space District

1) We open this section with a trip down memory lane. Recall if you will that in 2021, The Conservation Foundation purchased a 129-acre site in the Village of Campton Hills, holding it until the Township Open Space District could secure the funding to in turn purchase this bifurcated agricultural tract that is complemented by dense woodland. Well, that day arrived this past fall (coincidentally two years to the day after TCF first closed on the land), when the District acquired the property with support from the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** and the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund. The land is an addition to the District's now 348.2 acre Corron Farm – which contrary to the name has over the last twenty years been transformed into a healthy tallgrass prairie paired with a restored savanna home to centuries old burr, white, and red oaks; an ecological sanctuary and recreational resource that's now gotten a whole lot bigger and is, as it happens, directly adjacent to the property the Foundation acquired last year that I discussed above and that will itself eventually be added to this consistently growing preserve.



✿ Champaign County Forest Preserve District

2) Welp, it happened again. A project that the Powers That Be were so certain would close last year that it went into my 2022 report ended up, well, not. Vexing, yes, but on the bright side I get to copy & paste last year's text! So, without further ado:

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



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

✿ Forest Preserve District of Cook County

3) I'll alternately start gushing or get annoyingly grandiloquent in these pages whenever the subject turns to even the smallest prairie remnant that escaped the plough. Indeed, those pieces typically involve me expounding about how even a single acre or two is of real value. What then can be said of a solid 75 acres of tallgrass prairie, complemented by a good 40 acres of savanna? Wolf Road Prairie is the largest native prairie in northeastern Illinois, and by all rights it shouldn't exist. Nestled near the border of Cook and DuPage Counties in the Chicago suburb of Westchester, the southern half of the prairie is crisscrossed with nearly century-old sidewalks installed as part of a new residential subdivision that went belly up when the Depression hit. Fifty years later someone tried again, and this time local citizens stepped in, purchasing the first parcel of what would ultimately become a 115.5-acre time capsule.



For a property with such a lengthy history and recognized value, it won't come as a shock to learn that the ownership matrix at this Illinois Nature Preserve is complex. The Forest Preserve District, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the nonprofit Save the Prairie Society (formed by that original dedicated cadre in 1974 to protect the first parcel of the future preserve) all own portions of the site. Well, they *did* all own

portions of the site, as last year the District acquired 57.2 acres from the IDNR and another 5.1 acres from the Society, assuming nearly full ownership of and responsibility for this quite literally irreplaceable and invaluable prairie and savanna complex. *(Photo credit: Dan Kirk)*

4) Two events transpired in late 2022 that're rather relevant to this next piece. First, the Forest Preserve District closed on a tract of land in the underserved southeastern part of the county in the Village of Glenwood near the neighboring Village of Ford Heights, and second, voters approved a referendum (detailed at length in last year's report, because geeking out over public policy is how I roll) that among many others things provides a consistent revenue stream for land acquisition.



I for one think it absolutely appropriate that the first property acquired with these newly secured funds builds on that project from a year prior, in the form of 129.7 acres of forest and field in the

aforementioned Village of Ford Heights, about half a mile west of the earlier project. These complement what to my mind is the site's most important feature in the form of Deer Creek, which passes through the north side of the property on its way to the nearby Thorn Creek that in turn flows through and unites a plethora of FPD holdings stretching for miles both north and south.

✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

5 & 6) Because you, my good readers, are likely about as enamored with reading endless pages of project descriptions as I am about writing them, I'll often merge those covering the same site in the interest of maintaining both your interest and what's left of my sanity. The District sadly outsmarted me by closing on a 23.1-acre addition to the now 1,330.8-acre Dick Young Forest Preserve in the southern portion of the County in early 2023 about half a year after purchasing a similarly-sized property in 2022. *However*, it's my good fortune that this newly acquired agricultural field is next door to that earlier project, and has the same bright future – eventual restoration to a (wet) prairie, complementing the expansive prairie system that already defines much of this impressively large preserve.



On the subject of consolidating my meandering observations and pointed asides, the Preserve continued its growth as the seasons turned, with *another* addition, this time of 94.6 acres on the opposite side of Seavey Road, which bisects the site. As part of the deal, the District deeded to the landowner – who retained a residential area on the northeast side of the property – a single acre of adjacent land along the road that's currently in agricultural production. One acre in exchange for almost 95 seems a good deal to me, even more so given that this latest addition will, you guessed it, be restored to prairie, which in case you haven't noticed this is shaping up to be a rather *large* grassland ecosystem.

7) An addition to the District's 3.6 acre Valley View Lots "Preserve" inspires in me a special kind of despair. This collection of housing lots in the midst of a residential development first appeared in these pages in 2020 and, much like the 2020 presidential campaign, is now back for an encore. Located a bit east of the Fox River in the central portion of the county, what we've got here is a collection of housing lots scattered across a residential community. What, I ask, am I rhetorically supposed to *do* with this? Well, there is one thing of note. Previously divided into eight geographically distinct units, this 0.09-acre addition (for a point of comparison, my last apartment was 0.03 acres) brought that number down to seven by linking up a previously lonely parcel with a larger agglomeration to the south. Progress! And that's all I've got.



8) The Stony Creek Preserve in the Village of Campton Hills (first discussed in the 2017 edition of this report when it was donated by a generous couple for whom it served as a retreat over six decades) has gotten a lot of neighbors over the past few years. A residential subdivision to the north, a subdivision to the south. With its namesake and scenic meandering creek flowing through the property from west to east, it's not hard to see why there was a fair amount of interest in continuing the trend by moving some folks in on the east. But alas, 'twas not to be; instead, both stream – a first order tributary of the Fox River – and the good quality oak and hickory woodland that fronts it are part of a 54.1-acre addition to the now 80-acre site. Hay fields and a residence round out the expansion, more than doubling the size of a preserve that's now all the better prepared to greet those fine new neighbors.



9) Hey, tired of reading about the Dick Young Forest Preserve? Well, tough. I didn't mention it up above, but that first addition to the site lies along a channelized stream that flows out from the preserve's Nelson Lake. Before eventually flowing into Blackberry Creek, the creatively named Lake Run first passes through the equally creatively named Lake Run Forest Preserve about half a mile to the south of its more well-known compatriot. This linear preserve expanded last year and in the process became a bit less linear with the addition of 82.7 acres with frontage along two public roads. A mix of agricultural fields and scattered trees that's also home to a small tributary of the stream, the land will eventually be restored to a mix of prairie and wetland, benefiting life both terrestrial and aquatic in equal measure.

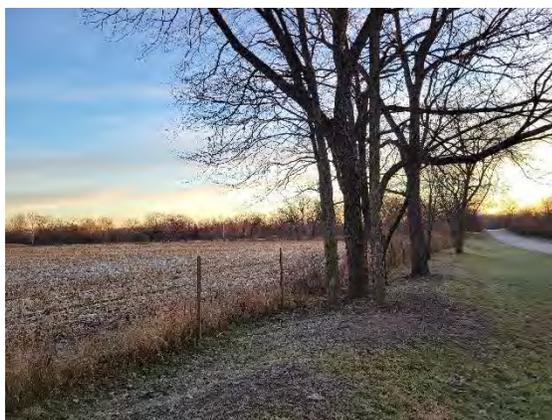


10) A parcel both high and dry. At the intersection of two major roads. Equally major residential and commercial presence literally next door. This is what the term "prime developable land" was *made* to describe. But that's not how the owners of this 6.7-acre remnant oak woodland saw things. *They* saw a forest of oaks, with many having first put down roots when the 20th century was but a far-off future; a piece of Kane County's history and a resource to be preserved for the future. And it's because of that vision that they donated to the public – not sold, but donated what, I will remind you, is *prime* commercial real estate – the Trieber Forest Preserve, an act of benevolence for which one and all owe a debt of quite deep gratitude.



✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

11) The Four Rivers Environmental Education Center...doesn't actually lie along four rivers. It *does* have frontage along two rivers though, and is reasonably close to another two, so I can forgive this deceptive marketing. Anyhow, the Center is part of the McKinley Woods preserve, stretching along the western bank of the Des Plaines River shortly before it merges with the Kankakee to form the state's namesake waterway. Anyone visiting this fine facility does so by driving past a lovely 7.9-acre agricultural field growing corn and soybeans. Wanting to ensure that the vista remain clear and open, the District added the field to the preserve in the first weeks of the then new year. And that is that.



Scenic farm field and preserve entrance
(FPDWC)

✿ Forest Preserves of Winnebago County

12) The Kishwaukee River, as I might just possibly have mentioned a time or three over the years, is the organizing feature around which a whole lot of land conservation efforts across three counties are focused. The FPWC's County Line Forest Preserve is no exception (I think, for this *one* project description, I can probably dispense with that bit where I explain where exactly within a county the property is located). Prairie, wetland, and woodland are cut through by the waterway as it wends its way towards the Rock. That combination clearly made an impression, because to its 159.1 acres last year was added an additional 95.9 acres across three disconnected parcels, all left to the Forest Preserve District in the estate of a neighbor. Two of these parcels are and will remain in agricultural production, while the third is mostly open field with a scattering of woodland, both cut through by a narrow creek flowing to the nearby river.



✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

13) Lake County is my home turf and, as it happens, is also home to Adeline Jay Geo-Karis Illinois Beach State Park. This is one of Illinois' most popular parks and the site of the state's very first dedicated Nature Preserve. It also encompasses a vegetative community found nowhere else in the state or, for all I know, the country. I'm pretty familiar with the place, is all I'm saying. That includes a 9.75-acre inholding of dry sand prairie, sand savanna, and sedge meadow owned by a local wastewater reclamation district that will forever *be* an inholding. It's an axiomatic fact. Not even worth looking at. I mean, they've obviously been using it for...something or other over the decades, else why would they still own it after so much time? So... ..that's the problem with assumptions kids, 'cause it turns out that this prominent donut hole of a property was *not* being used. For anything. It was just, you know, sitting there. All involved realized this wasn't particularly beneficial for anyone, leading to your author being quite surprised and equally pleased when it was announced that the land (surrounded, I should add, by dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve) had become the newest addition to this unique preserve.



14) Remember last year when I discussed the history of Illinois' northern border; how it was moved north by 50 miles in the resolution granting statehood to ensure the state would be firmly in the anti-slavery camp? Of course you don't. That was a year ago, and the report was over 25,000 words long. Your eyes had probably glazed over by the time you got to that part, assuming you hadn't given up entirely and thrown the thing in the trash. Well, joke's on you, because defying odds I can't begin to fathom, that early 19th century political maneuvering is again at the heart of one of these project descriptions; this time a humble 17.89-acre parcel in LaSalle County west of Starved Rock State Park.



Illinois' admission to the Union followed that of Mississippi by less than a year, as the factions in Congress worked to maintain the balance of free and slave states. [Already cognizant](#) of the potential for...let us call it heated discussion on said slavery issue, northern interests envisioned a single waterway linking the Atlantic with the Mississippi – both to facilitate trade and transportation more broadly. Construction of the Erie Canal, which would connect the Great Lakes with the nearby ocean, had begun a year prior. By building a corresponding canal connecting Lake Michigan with the Illinois River, this vision would be made manifest.

Illinois' territorial governor argued that by placing the future canal within the proposed state, its population growth would favor this geographically blessed locale, and further

tie the economy of that expanding portion of the state to the northern economic system. These arguments carried the day, and Illinois was granted its current borders. Within a decade, surveying work had begun for the new waterway, which was completed in 1848. Though long since abandoned in favor of more efficient transportation routes, it is in many places still extant, including here, where access to the 17.9-acre property is



I&M Canal (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

limited by the nearby historic waterway. That very inaccessibility made it an ideal addition to the state's Illinois and Michigan Canal State Park, which runs over 60 miles along of the former transportation corridor and, with this addition, is coming ever closer to the canal's terminus with the Illinois River, lying less than half a mile from the state's namesake waterway.

15) Most of these annual compendiums of good cheer have included a piece on an addition to the Franklin Creek State Natural Area in northern Lee County, adjacent to the Nachusa Grasslands and acquired by or in conjunction with the Franklin Creek Conservation Association. A 2.06-acre addition last year of woods and an open field on the south side of the SNA is no different, save for the fact that the parties to *this* particular public/private partnership *were* a bit different, with the land being donated by a generous individual. The woods are the name of this particular game, as they're part of the larger forest that covers much of the 932.7-acre property.



16) Pivoting back to Lake County, we arrive at Chain O' Lakes State Park. What we have here is an extensive wetland abutting small upland woods. Also, one heck of a view along a channel that empties into Grass Lake. I really like how this property is a natural extension of the park, enabling the larger wetland complex to be managed as something approaching a cohesive whole while taking the boundaries to the edge of a residential development that marks a natural boundary point. Add to that the fact that the 95.5-acre property increases the park's frontage along the lake, and it's a welcome addition whose value is so self-evident, you don't need me blathering on about it.



17) Oh, and about that lake (well, OK, nomenclature insists it's a different lake, but in reality this is all the same body of water) that's what a second, 13.3-acre addition is. Like, the whole thing. Not a speck of dry land to be seen. The Department picked this parcel up from the County, which had acquired it when the previous owner stopped paying the \$12 annual property tax bill – presumably after waking up one day and concluding that this was a pretty obvious waste of time. So what's the story here? Well, the property is nothing more than open water today, but as recently as the 1940s, much of it, as you can see on the map, was dry land. At some point over the following decade or so, the property was inundated ~~after the landowners broke the Ban of the Valar and sailed West to McHenry County...no, that's not it... was destroyed in a single night by earthquakes and floods in divine punishment following an attempt to conquer nearby Antioch...no...erm...~~ after the lake level rose, I presume intentionally in order to facilitate recreational pursuits in the postwar years. Before that, you had some prime realty; this parcel is a remnant of those decades past.



Your dream homesite. Some preparatory work required.
No refunds. (*Melissa Grycan*)

18) We return to Illinois Beach State Park for the conclusion of a story – nay, a quest – spanning decades. A bit of history is probably in order; a good chunk of the park's northern unit was platted into multiple residential subdivisions in 1927-1928. Quite shortly thereafter that development and many others across the country ignobly failed; my staff researcher is looking into the reason. Though the master plan didn't come to fruition, some of the prime lots along the lakeshore *were* eventually sold to folks in Chicago looking for weekend getaways. That worked great for a few decades until the lake started advancing. Needless to say, this confluence of events made acquisition of the land's rolling dunes, sand prairie, savanna, and wetland for incorporation into the park something of a no-brainer – doubly so when you remember how rare a lot of this stuff is.



All of those many lots (1,006 of them, to be precise) were now protected, but anyone reading these annual reports for a few years can likely tell you what wasn't – the public road and alley rights-of-way that bisected those many planned developments. So very, very many rights-of-way. Like, 128.3 acres of rights-of-way crisscrossing the site. DNR field staff recognized this for the threat that it was, and pushed for years to have the legal oddities excised from the plat books. That effort took on added import in the 2010s when a plan was proposed that would have seen water pipelines snaking all the way through the (globally rare and imperiled) sand prairie from one end of the park to the other.

The solution more farsighted heads than mine ultimately hit upon was to vacate not just the roads, but the entire series of subdivisions from which they arose. This would have the added benefit of reducing those aforementioned 1,006 lots to – and I am not exaggerating for comedic effect – one. You will not be shocked to learn that the County mapping and assessment teams were as eager to see this done as was the Department.

A reasonable person would probably conclude that vacating some plats would be a simple matter. That reasonable person would be wrong. Very wrong. Oh, pulling together a vacation instrument isn't too difficult if you know what you're doing – I recall having a conversation on the subject with the DNR's exceptional and I will argue *peerless* surveyor in late 2017 discussing his forthcoming plan to do just that as I stood in a Toys 'R Us (remember that chain?) buying a SNES Classic I'd reserved as a Christmas present for my sis. It's getting the <bleep>ing thing recorded that's the rub.

Lake County's rules on recording vacation instruments are...let us say as thorough as they are unusual. And so it came to pass that for the better part of five years that plat of vacation went back and forth between state and county. There are many words to describe what those involved in the effort thought of this state of affairs, but this is a family-friendly report so you'll have to use your imagination.



Spot the 60' ROW running between the dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. (David Holman)

All that finally came to an end last spring thanks to the herculean efforts of several super dedicated public servants at the Department. As luck would have it, everyone at the DNR working on this project was attending a livestreamed meeting at the Springfield airport when news of the endeavor's completion was announced, bequeathing to us a [visual record](#) of their reaction.

19) You'll find the Hanover Forest preserve in the records of some of the state's most esteemed conservation organizations. Found in southwestern Jo Daviess County outside the Village of the same name, the property is one of about a half dozen that were protected in 2003, creating the Hanover Bluff macrosite that's featured in these pages more times than I care to count.



Originally purchased by The Nature Conservancy, this 34.64-acre tract that you will not be particularly surprised to read is heavily forested – with a stylish grass strip bisecting the site under which runs a pipeline – was subsequently deeded to the Natural Land Institute which in turn registered the property with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission as a Land & Water Reserve. The preserve completed its journey this past year through incorporation with the DNR's Hanover Bluff State Natural Area (another name longtime readers will recall seeing a lot of over the last few years), pushing the property over the 1,200-acre mark. There's a lot to unpack there, so as a special bonus the map at right breaks out the state-owned property (shaded green) from the privately protected or federally-owned pieces (shaded teal) of this expansive and quite frankly awesome site.

20) Matthiessen State Park and its neighbor Starved Rock are two of the largest, most geologically varied parks in all the state. Forest and canyon, prairie and wetland, river and field; all come together in this 4,327.5-acre preserve to create one of the most popular recreational sites in the IDNR system. This 25.7-acre addition...is none of those things. It is in contrast an agricultural field on the western edge of the site; adjacent (save for a railway line) to the massive addition discussed in the 2018 edition of this report. While remaining in production for the near future, the property can in the future be readily developed to offer recreational and camping opportunities for visitors. That's all I've got here people. Not every parcel can have a lesson on civic and political history built into it, something more than a few of those reading these annual compendiums of mine are undoubtedly thankful for.



21) While we're on the subject of the largest parks in the state – the over 8,600-acre Pere Marquette. A couple years ago I had the...let's call it pleasure of writing about two tiny additions on the Jersey County behemoth's northern border that collectively totaled less than an acre. Mercifully given my need to find something to say about this thing, an 8-acre addition last summer was a tad bit larger. The forest that covers much of the area continues onto the parcel where it meets an open



field bestriding a driveway and pole barn. At this point you're probably expecting me to drone on about how protecting more of the forest – even this small area – is of value given the importance of vast unbroken forest expanses for more than a few woodland fauna, and there's definitely something to that. But come on. It's a handful of woodland acres at the very edge of the park. And it's that last bit that's the relevant bit, because what the parcel *really* does is push said park to its natural boundary along a public road to the north, protecting the forest from the potential of residential encroachment. Sexy? Not so much. But unquestionably valuable.

22) On the 31st of July, 2014, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources committed an act of nearly unspeakable, willful malice. What merits such a charged accusation? They accepted the deed to the former (and future) Fort Defiance State Park from the local municipality that had itself accepted ownership of the site from the state in the 1990s. This heinous act was, I can only presume, taken with the sole goal of making my life a waking nightmare, because the legal descriptions describing this place – you know, the things I use to map out the boundaries of parks and preserves large and small across the state – are *horrendously* complicated. Like, hours upon hours of frustration complicated.



If you asked the DNR's leadership, they'd probably tell you that the Department reassumed ownership of this historic locale – the lowest point in Illinois, site of a military encampment during the Civil War, positioned at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and fought over for a good thousand years or more – because the State was ideally positioned to restore what had become a rundown, physically dangerous former campground to its former glory, but they are lying liars, as logic dictates that they instead did so just to mess with my head. As proof, I give you a land exchange last year between the DNR and DOT, with the former deeding to the latter just under a quarter acre to facilitate improvement of the adjacent U.S. Route 51, and the latter deeding a bit over seven acres for incorporation into the State Park, for a net addition of 6.92 acres – which was, as is par for the course, accomplished via legal descriptions that gave me PTSD. Clearly, the Man is out to get me.



Fort Defiance State Park (IDNR)

23) Readers who hadn't completely tuned out by the time they got to page 64 of last year's report will recall that I took the opportunity to wax lyrical on the awesomeness of multiple layers of protection for properties. You know, things like conservation easements, Illinois Nature Preserve dedication, or deed restrictions. It's the oft overlooked deed restriction that has a starring role in this 151.1-acre addition to the north end of the Cache River State Natural Area that spreads across over 18,000 acres near the southern tip of the state, and I love it. The property was acquired in large part with the support of federal funds; specifically from the Pittman-Robinson Wildlife Restoration Grant Program – a program that of course needs no introduction and that I'd definitely, totally heard of before sitting down to write about this project. One of the stipulations of such funding is that the deed be encumbered with the provision that the property can't be "conveyed or encumbered, or the use changed...without first obtaining written approval" from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and that the restriction will remain in place until the [heat death of the universe](#) unless the USFWS chooses to release it. This ensures the land – dry-mesic upland and low-lying floodplain forest communities bordering a few



Cache River State Park (*Kristie DeBrun - IDNR*)

agricultural fields that also happens to lie adjacent to a registered Land & Water Reserve – won't be repurposed by some future administration (or, if we were talking about a nonprofit land trust, some future board), and thus, I decree, is something that should serve as a model to be emulated by one and all. I have spoken.

24) I'll be the first to geek out over a one acre prairie remnant, but I also readily admit that sheer size has an attraction all its own. And that's precisely what the DNR has given us at Ten Mile Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area with this, the single largest land protection project of the year. Coming in at ~967.6 acres, we're looking at additions to both east and west of one of the site's nearly dozen geographically distinct units, this one in southeastern Jefferson County. Though the property combines forests and agricultural fields, a series of strip-mined lakes are the land's most prominent feature, and also a big reason why this property has since 1991 been the state's number one acquisition priority across the entire nearly 6,000-acre SFWA. Previously divided between public and private ownership, the addition unifies ownership of all of those lakes, not only making management a heck of a lot easier, but expanding the Department's ability to open the land and more to the point its invitingly productive fisheries to the public.



25) How does one follow up almost 1,000 acres of wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities? Oh, need you even ask? With *road frontage*, that's what. And an ag field! Also, a smidgen of woods, all contained with a 20.0-acre addition to Lowden-Miller State Forest. I can feel your eyes widening in wonder with every passing word. Yes, this parcel, so eloquently and movingly described by the DNR as "a medium priority for acquisition" is the newest addition to the now 2,356.2-acre State Forest in south central Ogle County. That road frontage is the big thing here, as it offers notably improved access to the site for both staff and the public, given that the previous closest point of entry was a bit over a mile distant.



26) To close out the year (literally. This one closed not a week ago), we return to a project from 2022. You will of course recall that the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation established the 137.5-acre Canyon Camp preserve (140.3 gross acres) via two acquisitions – one of which was supported by the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*** – that collectively included over 90 acres of



Canyon Camp along Apple River (*Jim Johannsen*)

registered Land & Water Reserve.

This mixture of grassland and forest borders both

the Apple River and the over 2,000-acre State Park that bears its name, so you can probably see the appeal. As was the plan from the beginning, the state has acquired from the land trust title to both parcels, incorporating each into this linear yet surprisingly expansive natural refuge.

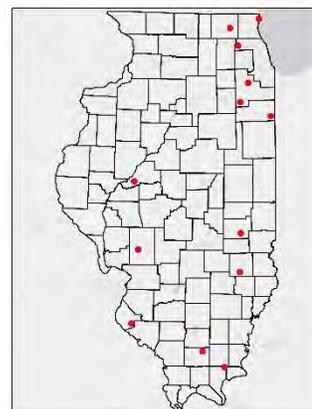


Two longtime residents showing off the neighborhood.
(*Kristie DeBrun - IDNR*)

✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

I imagine that the good folks at the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission lead quite the stress-free life. After all, their humble mission is merely to protect and steward the finest natural lands in the state of Illinois. You know, no pressure.

Fortunately for all of us, they were again in fine form last year, protecting 1,713.5 acres as Illinois Nature Preserves or Land & Water Reserves across 13 sites. And that split was oddly even across the board; seven NP dedications accounted for a bit over 50% of the land so preserved, with six LWR registrations preserving just under half of said land area. On top of this, about half of the projects are found to the south of I-80 and half to the north. Weird abundance of symmetry, right?



Anyhow, the public sector played a big role this year, but the private sector was no slouch. Conservation land trusts were once again significant players, but the number which most drew my attention was the 169.9 acres protected for the first time by private individuals looking to preserve for all time the forests and savannas, wetlands, prairies and streams that they have in many cases diligently stewarded for decades – a service for which I for one am *quite* indebted.

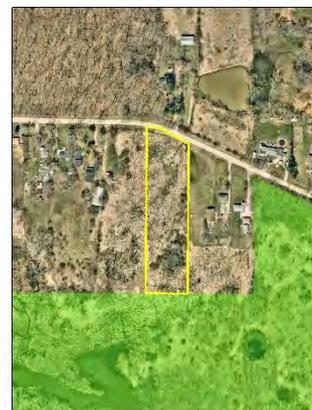
✿ Lake County Forest Preserve District

27) I'm going to level with you; writing these things is *frustrating*. I have to come up with something at least *mildly* interesting to say about something like 100 projects each year, and you know what's *not* interesting? Politicians giving interviews, yes, but also, repetition. Either will rapidly put you to sleep. So, each piece has to have some unique spin (and yeah, yeah, I know some are more engaging than others. No commentary from the peanut gallery).

Anyhow, for a long time, I thought that there was absolutely nothing worse than agonizing over a piece only to later learn that this definitely-going-to-close project was in fact *not* going to close, rendering my efforts meaningless. I was wrong. So, so wrong. No, the worst thing is to learn that the definitely-going-to-close project was called off...only to see it later revived well after I'd deleted my work, meaning I have to start all over again. Such was the fate of an 18.25-acre addition to the 1,188.4-acre Wadsworth Savanna Forest Preserve, nestled within the eponymous village. The two parties originally agreed to the sale back in 2021, but the contract was rescinded when a grant fell through. Riding to the rescue, to the gratitude of everyone but me because I'm still annoyed at having to rewrite this thank you very much was the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, which assisted the District in acquiring this upland forest and wooded wetland that's both a natural appendage of and provides depth to the forest and prairie of which it's now an integral part.



28) Oh, also, while we're on the subject and because narratively this bit fits better here than dropped several paragraphs further down, late in the year the District added another 2.9 acres to the Savanna, this time on the north end of the site. The property was acquired from the County government, which had taken possession of the land after the previous owner declined to pay property taxes on the parcel – probably because it's an unbuildable lot covered entirely by the wetlands that roll off of the nearby Des Plaines River. Not a great spot for a house, but a fine addition to a nature preserve...also to a Nature Preserve, as the addition is adjacent to land dedicated as such with the good folks at the INPC. And speaking of dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves...



Butterfly milkweed at the edge of a prairie. (*Diana Krug*)

29) Back in 2016, in the *very* early days of this report (so early that, sadly, the project descriptions I was penning were so basic that I can't save time and brain power by copy & pasting my way to victory with this one) I briefly noted a wetland addition to Lakewood Forest Preserve near the Village of Wauconda – valuable in part because it was surrounded by the existing preserve on three sides. Also valuable though because it's part of Broberg Marsh, the entirety of which was subsequently dedicated in 2021 as an Illinois Nature Preserve.



Why do I bring this up now? Because to my surprise the District wasn't finished, as evidenced by a small addition of upland largely oak forest on the west side of the marsh. Typically at this point, I'd blather something about "buffer this" or "depth that", but this time I can get a bit more specific. See, the whole idea of a buffer is that it protects the adjoining, usually higher-quality stuff. Never is that more the case than when water is involved. The aforementioned Broberg Marsh is, in the

technical jargon beloved by ecologists, “good stuff”; it provides wetland bird habitat that’s been noted as among the best in northeastern Illinois. When you’re protecting a wetland, it’s rather important to have some control over what flows *into* said wetland. And that’s the real value of this 6.4-acre site, all of which flows directly into the adjoining Nature Preserve.

30) Speaking of projects from days gone by, back in the late ‘80s the U.S. Army concluded that Fort Sheridan – on the shores of Lake Michigan – had served its purpose and elected to shutter the base. Selling and deeding pieces of the property to various parties, eventually 77.79 acres of ravine and lakeshore were turned over to the Navy, which was understandably like “Cool. But, um, what’re we supposed to do with this?” For reasons that elude me but probably had to do with funding, the Forest Preserve – which had worked with the Defense Department to create the 260.6-acre Fort Sheridan preserve directly to the north on a different portion of the old fort – didn’t feel that it had the capacity to take on this land that in all honesty needed some TLC.



That’s where Openlands stepped in. Acquiring the site in two phases in 2007 and 2010, the nonprofit got to work restoring the new preserve’s *three* lakeshore ravines. Given the geographical prerequisites, these ravines were pretty uncommon at the best of times, and on top of that most have been destroyed over the last century-and-a-bit. So to have three long intersecting crevasses in one place immediately drew

attention. Over the next few years, the nonprofit restored the property (home to six threatened or endangered species of plants – what else do you expect in such a rare ecosystem?), dedicated the entire thing as an Illinois Nature Preserve, and also opened it up to the public through the installation of an impressive network of trails connected by bridges and staircases over and through the steep topography. Anyhow, whatever was going down in the late 2000s has passed, such that the District was now in a position to take over ownership and management of the property as an addition to the Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve, which they’ve done. Oh, and hey, the equally impressive and equally restored Jean and John Greene Nature Preserve (with three ravines all its own) – owned and under easement by Lake Forest Open Lands Association – is adjacent to the Forest Preserve on the north, which makes for an impressive assemblage of ecologically valuable lands that as an added bonus offers one heck of a view. (*Photo credit: Openlands*)

✿ Libertyville Township Open Space District

31) Much to my dismay, I can't sell my neighbor's car out from under him and pocket the profits. For some reason I struggle to fathom, both society and the government look down upon such things. By the same principle, you can't buy land from someone who doesn't own it. This became something of an issue. See, back in '07, a now defunct land trust purchased a farm on the east side of the Village of Libertyville, in Lake County. It was a legit great project; the land enabled the connection of two extensive trail systems (which I now bike thrice weekly with my Dad). It was also a cooperative venture, with the nonprofit selling portions of the site to both the Lake County Forest Preserve District and the Libertyville Township Open Space District, while retaining the remainder.



Like most of the projects described in these pages, the farm was divided amongst a number of tax parcels, held in trust. So the owner was, say, "David Holman Trust". When the warranty deed was drawn up, the seller, as you'd expect, was the trust. But. Oh yes, there's a 'but' in this story. *But*, a *tiny* little 0.10-acre parcel *wasn't* held in trust. *It* was owned by the landowner in their name alone; like "David Holman". I assume, given its size, that it was simply missed whenever the trust was drawn up. Also – and this is about to become important, so pay attention – it was too small to generate a tax bill, such that there was no reason anyone would ever become aware of the different ownership structure.

Fast forward I don't know how many years, and the land trust has purchased the farm and sold the relevant parcels to the Township – which, as it happens, included the offending 0.10-acre site. They shortly thereafter received an interesting letter from the good folks at the Lake County Recorder of Deeds informing them that it's very nice that they claimed to have purchased this property, but the 0.10-acre parcel wasn't owned by the trust, it was owned by the individual, and since the trust was the only grantor, they had purchased the *rest* of the farm, but not that parcel. Relatedly, it was also very nice that they claimed to have sold said pinprick of a property to the Township, but you can't sell what you don't own.

Understandably, the land trust decided this was *not* worth spending time on, given the parcel is surrounded by the rest of the old farm, and so called it a day. Also understandably to anyone who knows me, upon learning what had happened I decided that This Shall Not Stand. Because, you know, it's me. The problem here was that whole too small to be taxed thing. That meant the land was still owned by the original seller – who had since died. Since the property wasn't taxed, it would theoretically continue to be owned by the decedent for all time. Seriously. This has happened. At the same site. A while back I had to deal with a [gap parcel](#) on another portion of the original farm, with the result being the County ultimately assigned ownership to a gentleman who, if memory serves, had passed away in 1906.

To solve this conundrum and get the parcel into the hands of the Township Open Space District – who had not been informed of *any* of this – I had a chat with the local assessor, who kindly agreed to boost the property’s assessed valuation so that it would generate a tax bill. Then, we waited. The landowner didn’t pay the property taxes, on account of being dead (though the key was to make sure no one else paid them either, simply out of confusion). After three or four years, the County acquired the land for nonpayment of taxes and made the site available for sale, which was the plan. The



The parcel is straight ahead. Don’t look to the left, nor to the right. Just straight ahead. Yes, I did go take a picture of it. (*David Holman*)

Township then submitted a request to purchase this maddening parcel, which the County – not particularly wanting to own a few thousand square feet in the middle of a former farm field and current buckthorn thicket – gladly accepted. And so the long bureaucratic saga finally came to an end, and so too does one of the longest project narratives in this report about, paradoxically, one of the smallest properties in this report.

✿ Plainfield Township Park District

32) OK, so normally I wouldn’t write about park districts, since most of my readership is a tad more focused on flora and fauna than on swings and slides. But I’ve got to make an exception, because what we’ve got here is a string of parks along the banks of the lower DuPage River in the City of Joliet that’re coming together to host an impressive trail that’ll stretch for over a mile. Sound familiar? It should, because we discussed this very site in 2021, when The Conservation Foundation acquired the 7.6-acre parcel with 1,500 feet of frontage along the river in partnership with the Plainfield Township Park District, holding the land until the District secured funding from the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund and the Forest Preserve District of Will County to purchase the property (with the latter also taking a conservation easement over the land...and now anyone who already knew about that easement understands why I didn’t mention this up above when discussing the District’s work last year). That done, the parcel now just about links two preexisting District holdings and brings that trail *really* close to reality...which would be nice in and of itself, but did you wonder even a little bit why the heck the Forest Preserve was involved?



Hammel Woods, that’s why. Hammel Woods? Yeah. Hammel Woods. The first pieces of this over 440-acre site were purchased in freaking 1930. Come the 21st century, the preserve was expanded to the north, eventually meeting up with the Park District

property visible at the bottom of the wonderful visual aid on the previous page. And what did the Forest Preserve do with this new property? Restore it to a mix of prairie and wetland, yes, but also build a winding trail that at present just so happens to terminate at that aforementioned Park District land. County and Township know an opportunity when they see one, such that the future trail isn't an isolated one-off, but will instead be linked to the Forest Preserve path, providing residents with over two and a half miles of a meandering river walk through the third largest city in the whole of Illinois.

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

33) As of 29 December, the only publicly available database of the easements held by the Natural Resources Conservation Service maintains that the agency acquired a single easement in 2023, protecting 74.4 acres of agricultural land south of the City of Delavan in Tazewell County via a Wetlands Reserve Easement. Just such a wetland is found in the center of the site, surrounded by short grasses that buffer agricultural fields on the adjacent properties. Anyhow, 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.



✿ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

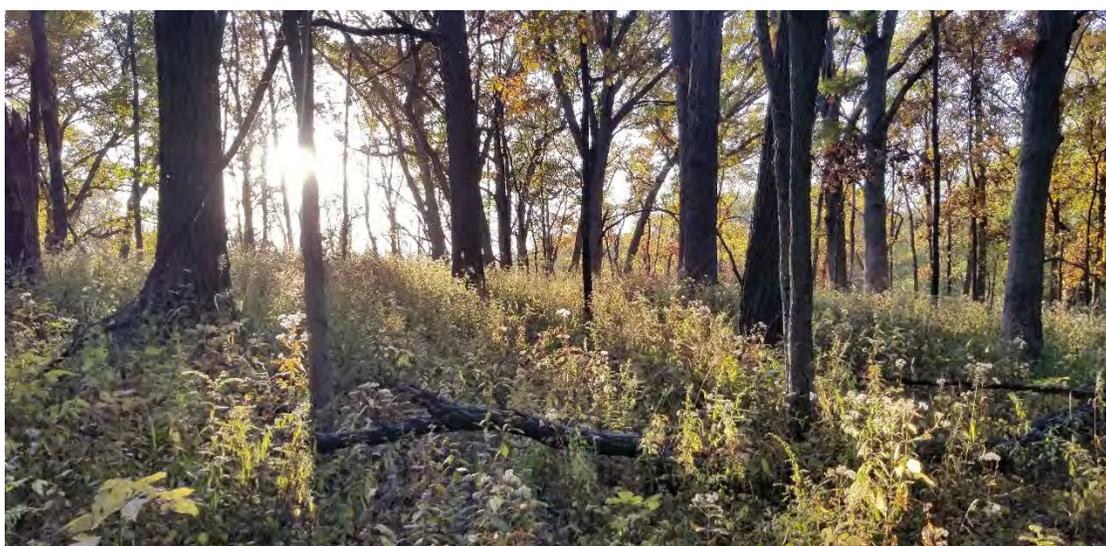
34) Anyone fearing that we'd get through this report without some Hackmatack goodness can rest easy, because we're closing out on a high. As most any reading this know, the National Wildlife Refuge is an actual, real public/private partnership – something that, contrary to the frequency with which the term is thrown around in press releases, is about as common as the Cubs winning a World Series – and that means a lot of the land will eventually be deeded to the federal government to be formally incorporated into the growing Refuge. As you've probably figured out, this is exactly what happened with a 46.6-acre property just northwest of the McHenry County Conservation District's Glacial Park. First acquired by Openlands in 2020 with support from the *Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation*, the Service purchased the site from the nonprofit last summer, with the proceeds going towards new protection projects that'll further expand this increasingly impressive site. There's a whole lot more to come, is all I'm saying.





Policy, Restoration, and Management

Protecting land is headline-grabbing stuff; heck, that's the vast majority of this report. But it's really only part of a *much* more complicated system. Public policy sets the stage not only for the bulk of land protection across the state, but also both pushes and is pushed by society to clean our air and water while making our entire society more sustainable. And as for that protected land? Sorry to say, but after two centuries of development and floral and faunal Eurasian imports, it's not exactly going to be a vibrant tableau just waiting to be posted to your Instagram feed without diligent restoration and management. And, taken together, *that* is why these projects are not only super important, but vital.



Diana Krug

- ✿ Somewhat surprisingly, I've never had occasion to discuss the definitely-named-by-committee Open Space Land Acquisition and Development ([OSLAD](#)) fund. Managed by the Illinois DNR, this program provides [well north](#) of a hundred grants every single year to local governments across the state for acquisition and development of land for public parks and, on a more limited scale, the preservation of natural areas. I might not (historically) have paid it much mind, but the **Illinois Environmental Council** and its compatriots certainly did. And that's to the advantage of everyone, because through their efforts the fund's, um, funding will nearly double this year to over \$100M. Now, this is a matching program, which is a bit of a barrier if you're a community that doesn't have a solid tax base. Thing is, those are kinda, sorta the communities that can benefit most from new or improved public spaces, so I was stoked to see that in addition to the program getting that substantial financial boost, a solid chunk of said funds will be directed to disadvantaged communities with the matching requirement completely waived. This is a well-developed, well-structured program that's a win no matter how you look at it.

✿ OK, so this is a fun one. It turns out – and bear with me here – fauna and flora in any particular locale interact in myriad, often complex ways that I’m told experts have taken to calling an ‘ecosystem’. Shockingly, if you remove pieces from that system, it starts to not work so well. It’s kinda like what would happen if you started pulling random pieces of metal out of your car, except instead of your car refusing to start, the web of life begins collapsing. Potato, potahto.

Anyhow, in a development that no reasonable person could possibly have foreseen, bison – as the single largest animal on the plains that in turn gathered in herds tens of thousands strong – had a wee bit of impact on the surrounding environment, from providing food for predators to fertilizing the sea of grass to promoting the soil microbiome; from the macro to the micro, in a very real way. Their absence thus doesn’t do the prairie or its many residents any favors. It’s to address that prominent deficiency that the **Forest Preserve District of Kane County** has elected [to reintroduce](#) the shaggy ungulates to the District’s Burlington Prairie preserve, nestled along the County’s western border north of the Village of Huntley.

I loved this story, in part because Burlington Prairie has that most rare of assets in greater Chicagoland – scale. At 950 acres (and almost all of this is actual grassland or, barring that, in agriculture. It’s not like it’s cut through with forest or marsh), there is definitely room to grow. For starters, the bison will be housed in two 30-acre paddocks, separated from the general public by high barriers that District staff emphasized will be unobtrusive in nature “rather than Jurassic Park fencing”. I hold that to be a wise move, as we all know [what happens](#) to anyone foolish enough to employ Jurassic Park-style fencing.

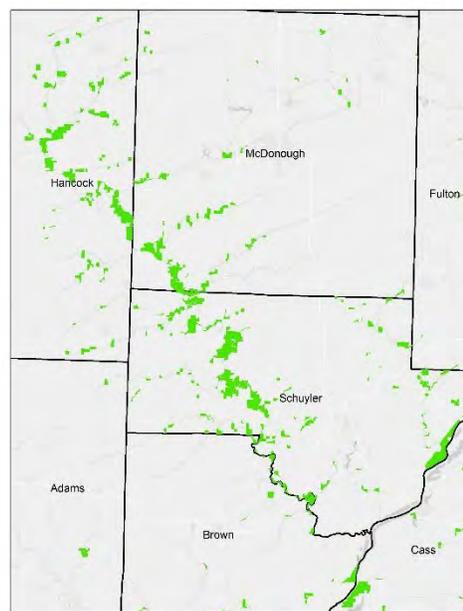
They join a herd established two years prior by the neighboring **McHenry County Conservation District** at its Pleasant Valley Conservation Area. Also, while we’re on the subject, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the creation of Illinois’ premier conservation bison herd at Nachusa Grasslands, a milestone that the herd at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie will cross next year.



Bison on the move. (McHenry County Conservation District)

✿ I write a lot about new projects or returning favorites, but a good chunk of policy revolves around defending valuable programs in the face of competing demands on a government that has to serve a really diverse constituency. Such was the case last year with the state's Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Their primary purpose is in the name, but these local governments take on a multitude of tasks [including](#) but not limited to flood control, pollution abatement, conservation, and, as some readers may recall, land protection. Anyhow, last year the state budget proposed slashing their funding by half, but the policy gurus over at the **Illinois Environmental Council** and their colleagues cogently and thoroughly demonstrated why this would be something of a bad move, such that the cuts were completely erased.

✿ Hey, remember a couple years ago when I expounded at some length on the mapping and incorporation into the statewide protected lands database (the thing behind I-View) of every last one of the conservation easements protected through the [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program](#)? In addition to finally completing the database and enabling me to pay my bills that year, so thank you again to all who supported my little quest, that exercise revealed that the program is responsible for nearly half the conservation easements in the state and over a third of the land under easement – and that's *if* you count everything in the similarly vast Illinois Nature Preserves system as an easement, which the Powers That Be most emphatically do not. It's a hugely influential program is what I'm saying. A program that's been paused since 2015. Which, you know, is not ideal. Thanks in part to the work of – once again – the **Illinois Environmental Council**, the Illinois legislature last year appropriated \$56 million to this immensely impactful initiative covering frequently flooded and environmentally sensitive agricultural land throughout the Illinois and Kaskaskia River watersheds, with the land being retired from production and returned to nature. Talk about value for money; thanks to this I know of over two dozen easements on track to close in 2024 alone. Good for Illinois, good for farmers, good for nature, but admittedly something of a pain for me, because my God that's a lot of easements to write about next year.



Actual CREP easement boundaries. I wasn't exaggerating; this program is massive.

✿ The North American Wetlands Conservation Act ([NAWCA](#)) is an interesting beast, and another of those pieces of legislation that a reasonable person would assume I'd have talked about years ago. Largely established to support migrating birds, the authors of the Act astutely observed – and I do hope you're sitting down for this – that the paths of those migratory flocks often take them *outside* the boundaries of the United States. Accordingly, the grant program established by the legislation funds projects to protect and manage wetland habitat not just within the States, but across North America. There's probably no greater practitioner of such projects that **Ducks Unlimited**.

Last year saw the completion of two such NAWCA-funded projects that, as is to be expected with most anything from DU, were notable as much for their ambition as their scale. First up, the nonprofit partnered with the Illinois DNR to do some emergency surgery at the Rice Lake State Fish & Wildlife Area along the shores of the Illinois River. The site name notwithstanding, this is a massive waterlogged site in Fulton County consisting of multiple water bodies, including the appropriately named Big Lake and its neighbor Goose Lake. The longstanding water control structure for the linked pair had degraded to such a degree that it wasn't controlling much at all, quickly moving towards total failure. The system was reinforced and restored, enabling the state to effectively manage this ~2,400-acre floodplain wetland to both control flooding and provide habitat for migrating waterfowl. *(Photo credit: NatFee – Creative Commons)*



Rather than overabundance, water scarcity defined the second project, this one at Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge in Calhoun County. Situated across the Illinois River from Pere Marquette State Park, the land south of Bundy Lake is now served by two deepwater wells and corresponding pumps capable of moving 3,000 gallons/minute. The wells will provide water to around 215 acres of moist scrub-shrub and forested wetlands in a project codeveloped and implemented by DU and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. This was just the first phase too; the Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will over the next few years install water management infrastructure that will further refine their ability to restore this land to a thriving vegetative community offering habitat to thousands of migrating wetland birds. It's as I said above; ambitious all around.

- ✿ Aesop observed that a man is judged by the company he keeps. What then does it say about Powderhorn Lake in southeastern Chicago on the Indiana state line that the **Forest Preserves of Cook County**, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Illinois DNR, Great Lakes Commission, and Audubon Great Lakes all came together for a [three-year project](#) to restore over 100 acres of wetlands?

The lake is part of the Calumet region, which longtime readers know has endured more than its fair share of environmental travails. The fate of Powderhorn Lake is no different. Once connected to neighboring Wolf Lake to the north (part of the William W. Powers State Recreation Area), for over a decade the link between the two was severed. This resulted in the once rich wetland around Powderhorn – a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve – regularly flooding as the lake overflowed, spreading invasive flora and wiping out native plants and habitats. That same overflow fundamentally altered the lake's ecology, rendering it unsuitable in its historic role as a fish nursery. The installation of a water control structure at the north end of the lake combined with

pipes connecting the two water bodies enables the water level at Powderhorn to be altered as needed to recreate its historic ebb and flow, with the excess water eventually draining into the Calumet River (as opposed to draining into the nearby homes that ring much of the preserve). Not only have the historic wetlands been restored, but fish and other aquatic fauna of all varieties can again readily travel between the two lakes. I really like this one for how it benefits the community across multiple dimensions on top of and *because of* the restoration of the land's hydrology and wider ecological systems.



Powderhorn Lake in all its glory. (*Forest Preserve District of Cook County*)

✿ Right, I'm not gonna lie; when I heard that Illinois Monarch (butterfly, not George III) license plate decals were finally available for purchase, I was like "huh. Well, OK. I guess that's nice." Flash forward through about half an hour of [research](#), and I'd transitioned to "Hey, this is great." Here's the deal. Back in 2016, the good folks at the **Illinois Environmental Council** worked with legislators to pass the bill creating this new plate. Anyone wanting said plate pays extra for the privilege, with that excess being deposited into the newly created Roadside Monarch Habitat Fund, used exclusively for the restoration or enhancement of habitat for insect pollinators (like, say, the Monarch butterfly) throughout the state.

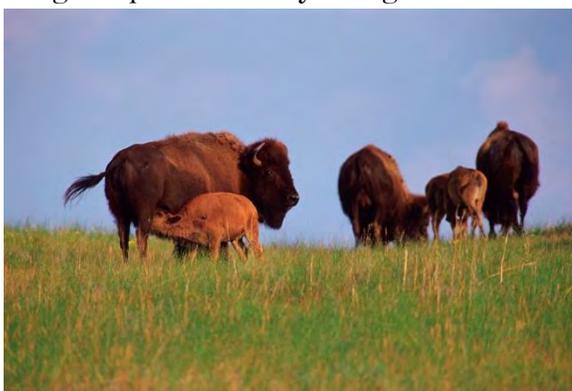
Less than two years later, more than 2,000 pollinator enthusiasts had committed to purchasing the decals (the threshold needed before the state would begin production). Then the country kind of, sort of shut down for a while. After being sidelined during the pandemic and its aftermath, things got back on track, and the plates are now live. It's a nice, simple way to raise funds for an undeniably important initiative, and one that a lot of people worked for a long time to bring to fruition.



Kenneth Dwain Harrelson – Wikimedia Commons

✿ We return to Cook County, because man has the Forest Preserve been on fire lately. Case in point, Red Gate Woods; part of the Palos Preserves. A few items up I discussed an FPD project that's been completed, but here we turn our attention to one that's just getting started. There hasn't been any publicity yet (at least that I know of), but there soon will be because, at 1,100 acres and a possible expansion to the 2K mark, this is the single largest restoration project in the District's history. The four-year, state-funded endeavor started last fall, and in these early days is heavily focused on clearing the invasive flora that anyone reading this report will intuitively understand is *really* thick on the ground. Ecological restoration will eventually be paired with improvements to the preserve's trail system, with the ultimate goal of unifying a patchwork of forest and wetlands of highly variable quality into a unified ecological whole.

✿ I freely admit; this next one was unexpected. About two years ago the federal government established the America the Beautiful Challenge; a name which I can only assume was focus group-tested to within an inch of its proverbial life. The idea, among other things, was to consolidate funding from "multiple federal agencies and the private sector", facilitating the development of large projects focused on ecosystem restoration. **The Wetlands Initiative** and **Openlands** both thought this a fine idea, observing 1) that, of ecosystems, that of the tallgrass prairie was more in need than most of restoration and 2) hey, you know what Illinois has? Midewin; the nation's first national tallgrass prairie.* They thought these two facts significant, and so too did the grant



Bison at Midewin. (Fran Harty)

review folks, as this past November, the project these two groups and the Midewin team from the U.S. Forest Service conceived and developed was awarded \$1.5M – complemented by another \$375K in matching funds – [to begin restoration](#) on a ~1,300-acre tract adjacent to the preserve's bison paddock. More specifically, the project will remove trees and shrubs. Lots and lots of trees and shrubs.

The project area is roughly divided into two units, united by Grant Creek as it meanders through on its way to the nearby Des Plaines River. Most of the southern portion, adjacent to the land where the bison now roam, is dotted with bunkers from the preserve's past as an ammunition depot. The balance is in agricultural production. Everywhere – and I do mean everywhere – is covered with woody interlopers, many of them invasives. The two-year project's major immediate impact (aside from generating a whole lot of firewood) will be to reduce habitat fragmentation for grassland birds that for obvious reasons find Midewin quite attractive and for equally obvious reasons find woody expanses significantly less attractive. Similarly noteworthy, it'll facilitate the expansion of the bison area by about 380 acres, as well prepping the Grant Creek watershed – of which it sits at the head – for restoration to prairie and wetland.

* Note to public relations folks everywhere: There might maybe, possibly, potentially be value in dropping the contention that it's also the [only](#) national tallgrass prairie. Just a thought.

- ✿ The **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** [tracked](#) nearly 71,000 acres that were burned over the course of the 2022-2023 season (July 1 – June 30), second only to the (revised dramatically upward) previous season, and that only by a very small margin. What I'm saying here is that prescribed fire has gone mainstream, and that's a very good thing. Vital not only for the health of grasslands, but also forests, these burns rejuvenate the land and, in the case of the latter, prevent the buildup of large quantities of dry vegetation that would otherwise eventually ignite in a far more intense, uncontrollable conflagration. Taken together with the lack of fire adaptation displayed by many grassland invasives (for most prairie grasses, the majority of the plant lies [deep beneath the surface](#). For most Eurasian grasses, the root system is quite shallow), prescribed burns are a versatile tool that serves to *both* restore and maintain the natural ecosystem. So to see such burns achieving and then maintaining a new high is something to celebrate indeed.



Illinois Prescribed Fire Council

- ✿ The **Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship** grant program, as most reading this will recall, exists to support the state's network of 501(c)(3) conservation organizations in their stewardship of lands that are part of the Illinois Nature Preserves system. Given that a) these forests and wetlands, rivers and prairies 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 Illinois DNR's Natural Areas Acquisition Fund, in its third year the program made [eleven grants](#) totaling \$747,387.14. Now, on one level this is great, as it boosts by about 50% the awards made in 2022. But on the other... I mean, last year, if you'll recall, I explained the program awarded exactly \$500K down to the penny. I for one appreciated that admittedly meaningless exactitude. Because I'm weird like that. Anyhow, *this* year the grant funds were devoted at a ratio of ~3:1 between purchasing equipment or supplies and supporting staff on the one hand and engaging in contractual services to assist in restoring and managing these high quality sites on the other. I for one think it's pretty sweet seeing the larger INPC system get the care it legitimately deserves given the ecological value all these properties hold.



Downstate beauty (Cynthia Kanner)

✿ We close with a subject that on a personal level I find about as engrossing as the inexplicably popular question of where Taylor Swift went on date night last week; a topic on the tip of every tongue – *carbon credits*. No, no, stay with me here. Carbon credits are increasingly a thing, and while I myself take a jaundiced view of the entire concept – preferring instead the completely politically impractical carbon *tax* (which is exhibit 37 in the foundational research paper “Why David would never be a successful politician”) – this innovative financial instrument is only becoming more ubiquitous.

Case in point, [City Forest Credits](#) which, as a volunteer maker of pretty maps for these things, I have for the last year known exclusively as “that project that never ends, please God make it stop.” Conservation groups on the other hand, as I’ve recently learned, view the program somewhat differently; as a valuable resource through which they can secure funding for the restoration and management of the forests and woodlands many so ably steward. The concept is simple enough. Whereas mitigation credits – be it for wetlands or woods – are generated through the restoration or enhancement of previously degraded sites, carbon credits are created through a legally enforceable promise not to cut the trees down. The owners of said trees receive payment, while the purchasers of the credits gain the social (or in rarer cases actually legal) license to emit some quantity of carbon into the atmosphere. For organizations whose *raison d’être* is the preservation of the natural world, getting paid to, you know, do what you already



Carbon sink (LFOLA)

wanted to do, with that money being used to further enhance the land’s health and vitality is a rather good deal, and one that last year [Lake Forest Open Lands Association](#), the [Natural Land Institute](#), and the [McHenry County Conservation Foundation](#) all decided to take full advantage of, with each now in the process of restoring properties that through these agreements have also been granted an extra layer of legal protection.



A Conversation with our Robot Overlords

My newsfeed this past year has been obsessed with AI and more specifically ChatGPT; the panacea to the world's woes, repository of global knowledge, get-of-jail free card for students writing essays, and apparent reason Nvidia's stock price is up 300% in two and a half months. I decided to have a chat with the chatbot (the algorithm's initial response is lightly edited for brevity):

Me: Identify the native prairie remnants located in Illinois.

ChatGPT: Illinois, once dominated by vast prairies, has experienced extensive habitat loss due to agriculture and urban development. However, there are still remnants of native prairies preserved across the state. The following are some examples of native prairie remnants in Illinois:

1. Nachusa Grasslands: Located in Lee and Ogle counties, Nachusa Grasslands is one of the largest and most well-known prairie restoration projects in Illinois. It features diverse prairie plant communities and is managed by The Nature Conservancy.
2. Gensburg-Markham Prairie: This prairie remnant is situated in Markham, Cook County. It is one of the few remaining high-quality prairies in the Chicago metropolitan area and is managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

continues with a list of six other legit prairie remnants

It's important to note that the management and accessibility of these prairie remnants may vary, and some areas may require permission or have specific guidelines for visitation. Conservation organizations, state agencies, and local park districts often play key roles in preserving and restoring these valuable remnants of Illinois' native prairies.

Me: Gensburg-Markham Prairie isn't managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

ChatGPT: I appreciate the clarification. As of my last knowledge update in January 2022, Gensburg-Markham Prairie is indeed managed by a different organization. It is part of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, not the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County play a significant role in the management and conservation of natural areas within Cook County, including prairie remnants. I apologize for any confusion in my previous response, and I appreciate your correction. For the most accurate and up-to-date information about specific prairie remnants, including Gensburg-Markham Prairie, it's

recommended to check directly with the managing organization or the official website of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Me: Gensburg-Markham Prairie isn't managed by the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

ChatGPT: I appreciate the clarification. I apologize for the error in my previous responses. As of my last knowledge update in January 2022, Gensburg-Markham Prairie is managed by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, not the Forest Preserves of Cook County or the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

The Illinois Nature Preserves Commission is responsible for the management and protection of dedicated nature preserves, including significant natural areas such as Gensburg-Markham Prairie. For the most accurate and up-to-date information about Gensburg-Markham Prairie or any other nature preserve in Illinois, it is recommended to check directly with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission or the relevant managing authority.

I appreciate your patience and understanding, and I apologize for any confusion caused by the earlier inaccuracies.

Me: Gensburg-Markham Prairie isn't managed by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.

ChatGPT: I appreciate your patience, and I apologize for the inaccuracies in my previous responses. As of my last knowledge update in January 2022, Gensburg-Markham Prairie is indeed managed by the Thorn Creek Audubon Society.

For the most accurate and up-to-date information about Gensburg-Markham Prairie, including access, events, and management practices, it is recommended to check directly with the Thorn Creek Audubon Society or the relevant local authority. I appreciate your understanding, and I apologize for any confusion caused by the earlier errors.

Me: Gensburg-Markham Prairie isn't managed by the Thorn Creek Audubon Society. Also, what is the Thorn Creek Audubon Society?

ChatGPT: I apologize for the confusion in my previous responses. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.

As of my last knowledge update in January 2022, I don't have specific information about the management of Gensburg-Markham Prairie. I appreciate your understanding and recommend checking directly with local authorities or conservation organizations in the area for the most accurate and up-to-date information about Gensburg-Markham Prairie.

Regarding the Thorn Creek Audubon Society, it appears there might be a misunderstanding in my previous responses. While the Thorn Creek Audubon Society is an organization dedicated to bird conservation and environmental

education, it may not be directly involved in the management of Gensburg-Markham Prairie. The society is likely to be focused on bird-related activities, habitat conservation, and educational programs in the Thorn Creek area.

For precise details about Gensburg-Markham Prairie and its management, I recommend reaching out to local environmental or conservation agencies, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, or similar organizations in the region. They should be able to provide the most accurate and current information about the management of Gensburg-Markham Prairie.

Me: OK, thank you for your time. One final question. Is putting two spaces after a period ever defensible, or is it an abomination unto mankind?

Chat GPT: The debate over whether to use one space or two after a period has been a long-standing one, and opinions on the matter can be quite strong. However, in modern writing and typesetting practices, the convention has shifted towards using a single space after a period. This change is largely due to technological advancements, as modern fonts and word processing software are designed to handle proportional spacing.

Using two spaces after a period was a convention from the typewriter era, where monospaced fonts made the extra space helpful for visual clarity. With the advent of proportional fonts and improved typesetting, the need for two spaces diminished. Most style guides, including those of major publishing houses and academic institutions, now recommend using a single space after a period.

While the debate can be spirited, current conventions in professional writing favor the use of one space after a period. However, it's important to note that personal preferences and style choices can still vary, and some individuals may continue to use two spaces out of habit or personal preference. Ultimately, the key is to be consistent within a given document or publication to maintain a polished and professional appearance.

Me: Well, at least we can agree on one thing.

ChatGPT: Absolutely! Agreement on matters of writing style is a good starting point. If you have any more questions or if there's anything else I can help you with, feel free to ask. Happy writing!

Welp. I begin to see why [third-rate](#) lawyers using the service keep getting in trouble for [filing legal briefs](#) citing nonexistent case law. There's probably an object lesson buried somewhere in here.



2022 Revisited

Last year was the longest report I've ever written, a fact which I suspect has inflicted PTSD upon both myself and my readers, albeit for slightly different reasons. A reasonable person might conclude that the result was a comprehensive compendium of newly protected lands across the state, but alas, it was not to be. Rather, there were *more* projects over the course of 2022 that eluded my gaze than ever before. That said, given the voluminous nature of that document, this was probably for the best. Join me then if you would for one final look at 2022.

✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

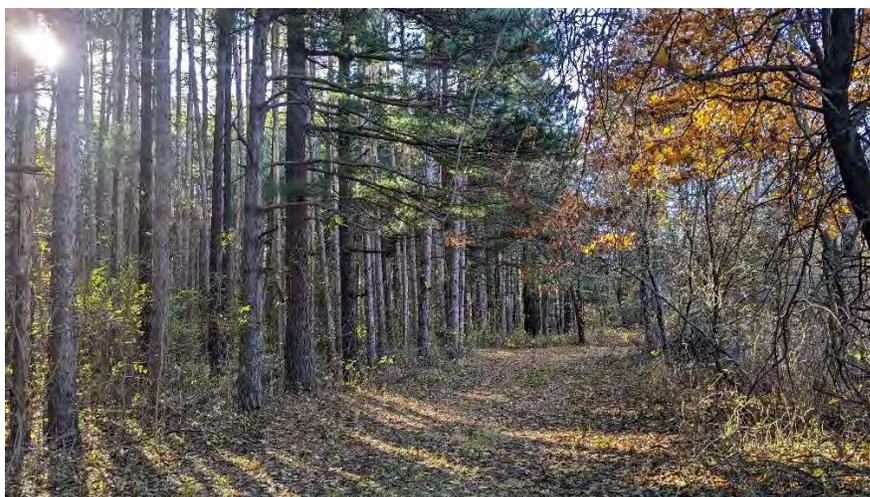
OK, I'm always bummed when it turns out I missed a project, but in this case it kinda works to both your advantage and mine, because we can make this quick. The 557.8-acre Wise Ridge Bedrock Hill State Natural Area in Johnson County is a really nice place. Over half of the property has been registered as an Illinois Land & Water Reserve, hosting pretty high-quality dry upland and dry-mesic upland forest. And that has *nothing whatsoever* to do with this small, 1.5-acre addition found at the southern end of the site. Instead, this one was all about parking (for hunters) and connections; specifically, connecting two previously isolated units of the SNA with the main body of the property. To the north, that takes the form of an open field paralleling a small creek, while to the south we're looking at a mostly wooded extension of the forest which covers much of the property. See? That wasn't so bad, was it?



Next up, we're once again in Johnson County, and once again we're talking about an addition to an existing preserve. But this one is big. Quite a bit bigger. Like, 113.2 acres big. The Cache River State Natural Area, as mentioned in passing earlier in this report, was already ~18,000 acres of cypress-tupelo forest goodness, most of which has also been registered as an Illinois Land & Water Reserve. And it's forest that's the focus of this project. Three separate wooded tracts spread over about a mile and a half as the crow flies are all natural extensions of the SNA, in two cases taking the property to the edge of agricultural fields that border much of the larger site. In all three, they make management of the forest a good deal easier if for no other reason than that, speaking from experience, it's rather difficult to find a property line when you're standing in the middle of the forest with nothing but trees and swamp in all directions.



To close out the trifecta of missed DNR projects, we're *again* in Johnson Coun...naw, I'm just messing with ya. This time, we head north to Henderson County and the Big River State Forest; located appropriately enough on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River. Big River is another site that's divided into distinct geographic units. This 122.77-acre addition...doesn't actually unify any of those parcels, but it *does* come close, so that's nice. More to the point, the mostly wooded parcel (though with a healthy number of buildings on the north end) is bordered by the State Forest on two sides, so its incorporation into the site simplifies management of the property while also expanding hunting opportunities and maintaining wildlife habitat. Nothing major, but by no means insignificant either.



Big River State Forest (Kristie DeBrun - IDNR)

✿ Heartlands Conservancy

Wetland mitigation banks – restoring lands once drained (and typically farmed) to their original semi-aquatic state to compensate for the loss in the present day of other nearby wetlands through the land's development was *the* core of Heartlands' work throughout 2022, with three such projects discussed in last year's report. Never one to rest on its laurels, the land trust spent the weeks leading up to the winter equinox finalizing and accepting easements over four *additional* mitigation properties; projects that escaped the attention of my pen last year simply because the land trust was so darned busy that these understandably slipped through the proverbial cracks. All are to be found in southern Clinton County. The largest, at 78.814 acres lies just south of the Village of Germantown. A second, at 25.0 acres, is found to the east, while the last two, taking in 19.87 and 31.57 acres respectively, lie in the middle – adjacent, as it happens, to one of the projects I had the pleasure of reviewing last year. And that's that!



✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

Over 20 years ago a visionary couple began working with The Land Conservancy towards what would become a conservation easement over 60.5 acres of remnant and restored oak/hickory woodland, ponds and vernal pools, and to top it off restored prairie. Today, the land hosts nearly 100 species of birds, not to mention a great blue heron rookery. The ponds host a state endangered plant, and the woodlands a diverse understory of flowers and sedges, grasses and shrubs. And that was only the start. Inspired by his parents, the couple's son donated an adjacent 28.6 acres outright a decade later to create the Barefoot Savanna Preserve. Fast forward another decade, and both generations are living in Indiana. Rather than selling the property, the landowners wanted to ensure that their decades of restoration work would be not only honored but continued, and so donated the easement area to the TLC. Merged with the existing preserve and rechristened Barefoot Ridge, the combined 89.1-acre preserve is one of the best examples I know of for what two decades of dedicated restoration can really achieve.



It's not exactly common for a land trust to assume ownership of property they hold an easement over, yet here I am discussing two such projects in rapid succession. In 2008, the Hennen family placed an easement over their 25-acre property in the City of Woodstock – part of a larger project that saw the land donated to the city the following year to create the Hennen Conservation Area. Shortly thereafter, city and land trust came to an agreement that saw TLC move into the farmhouse and other buildings on site as their new (and still current) office, in exchange for the Conservancy maintaining the buildings and, I suspect of great interest to the community, developing and maintaining a trail system throughout the wooded preserve.



The city, not being in the business of owning buildings that it doesn't use itself, eventually came to the decision that it made sense for TLC to take ownership of the farmstead and part of the surrounding land totaling five acres, and that's exactly what they did, with both parties maintaining their now 15-year partnership – a partnership that I expect to continue for many years to come.



Wood Betony (*Diana Krug*)

✿ Morton Arboretum

For over a century, the Morton Arboretum has been a Chicagoland landmark. Its 1,144 acres stretch across densely populated central DuPage County, a wooded oasis matched only by the national programs and international science spearheaded by a topnotch team drawn from around the nation. And it is that team that's the target of my ire, because last year they oversaw something that was quite literally beyond my ability to conceive – an addition to the Arboretum. I know, right? The place is an institution whose boundaries have been set since, to the best of my knowledge, well before I was born. It's surrounded by residential development. Why would I even *think* about checking to see if the site had expanded? And yet expand it did, with 18 acres on the western side of the property that brought to a close an endeavor begun over two decades ago. Taking in a residence, pond and, of course, forest, the land thrusts nearly half a mile into the Arboretum proper, which abuts the property on three sides. It's a fantastic addition that both simplifies management of the area while presenting a wealth of new opportunities.



✿ Prairie Land Conservancy

Earlier in this sprawling document I had the pleasure of revisiting the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program – a cooperative venture between the US Department of Agriculture, the Illinois DNR, and local Soil & Water Conservation Districts that accounts for almost half of all the conservation easements in the state. Why is this relevant? Because in the early months of 2022 the Prairie Land Conservancy established the 160.4-acre Anderson Wildlife Preserve adjacent to *three* such easements northeast of the City of Carthage in Hancock County encompassing 461.2 acres along the La Moine River and several of its tributaries – including one Prairie Creek. And it's this waterway that is the centerpiece of the preserve, bisecting the mesic forest as it wends its way towards the river. Ephemeral pools alongside the creek give way to mesic forest over the balance of the property, all of which will be restored and managed by the Conservancy, buffering and in turn buffered by the low-lying lands to the east. Not too shabby.





Changes at the Top

- ✿ **Alan Branhagen** has joined **The Natural Land Institute** as Executive Director, and everyone reading this is the beneficiary of that simple act. Mr. Branhagen returns to Illinois following six years at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum managing pretty much the entire gamut of the organization's departments, from plants to buildings and from the excitement of capital projects to the nuance of I.T. Before that, he spent over two decades as the Director of Horticulture at the Kansas City Botanical Garden in Missouri. Ah, but I wrote at the top that NLI marks his *return* to Illinois, didn't I? That's because he began his career at the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District, where over almost a decade he played a key role in the expansion and development of the District's holdings. Mr. Branhagen takes over from **Kerry Leigh** who has in a decade compiled a record of achievement many would be happy to build over an entire career. Quite aside from successfully leading the state's oldest, most distinguished land trust in the management of preserves and easements scattered across a dozen-plus counties, under her leadership the organization protected over 1,500 acres throughout northwestern Illinois while simultaneously building a rock-solid infrastructure – both financial and physical – that set the Institute on a path that I fully expect will lead to successes unimagined even by the organization's visionary founders.

- ✿ There's a new face in the offices overlooking Millennium Park; one that many readers of this report will likely become quite familiar with over the coming years, as **Michael Davidson** has joined **Openlands** as the organization's new CEO. Though new to the organization, he's a veteran of Chicago's Loop, where he most recently served as the senior director of community impact a few blocks away at The Chicago Community Trust. In that role, he provided support for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's master plan, and a similarly ambitious vision for the sum total of Chicago's rather extensive river system. He assumes the role as a man I will without reservation proclaim a legend begins a well-earned retirement. What can I say about **Gerald (Jerry) Adelman** that won't be a retread of the accolades bestowed by those far more eloquent than I? Not much, that's what. And so by necessity the frame within which I pen these words is personal experience. Mr. Adelman has been the CEO of Openlands for as long as I can remember, guiding the organization through all or parts of seven presidential administrations. In that time, Openlands has been at the vanguard of some of the biggest conservation initiatives not only in northeastern Illinois, but across the country – and, incidentally, this is to say nothing of Mr. Adelman's national and international work. From the creation of the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, to the Little Calumet River and African American Heritage Water Trail, to the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, to successful policy initiatives, to the [Liberty Prairie Reserve](#), and so very much more, Openlands under Mr. Adelman's tenure has been a true inspiration.

That last one is little known to most reading my musings, but it's where I first did volunteer restoration work as a teenager and, of greater interest to anyone who's ever used I-View or asked me to map something, is the place where and reason why I taught

myself to read & map legal descriptions and do the research needed to uncover and put into context historic land protection projects. The Reserve is one of the only true public/private land protection partnerships operating at a macro scale in the state, and it was to document the literally dozens of fee holdings, conservation easements, deed restrictions, and Illinois Nature Preserves – a mix spearheaded by Openlands as much as by anyone else – that I undertook to teach myself the skills needed to make that a reality. Basically, the entire statewide protected lands database has its start in this unusual partnership that Openlands made possible (on an easement over that golf course in the northeast corner of the place, as it happens. An easement that, of course, is held by Openlands).

- ✿ The inestimable **Jo Fessett** has taken the reins at the **Illinois Audubon Society**. This was, I can say without any hesitation, a *fantastic* decision by all involved that brought a big smile to my face upon learning the news. Ms. Fessett has long been part of the organization's senior management team, helping guide the Society to ever greater heights. Seriously; re-read my old annual reports. All of the many, many IAS projects discussed therein? Ms. Fessett was part of each and every one of them. She assumes the reins of leadership from **Dr. James (Jim) Herkert**, who after what was by *any* definition a successful five-year tenure capped by the unprecedentedly generous bequest extolled in last year's report (one he and his predecessor Tom Clay brought to fruition during their respective tenures) has embarked on a well-deserved retirement. As I wrote in this space when he took the reins at IAS, Jim's "list of notable accomplishments is longer than my entire resume," with a career spanning both the public and private sectors. Basically, anyone with even a passing interest in Illinois conservation owes him a rather deep debt of gratitude.
- ✿ This year's report featured a treat for residents of Sangamon County with the transfer to local ownership of the Merrill Preserve. Those looking for someone to thank would do well to look up **Angela Funk**, who clearly started her tenure as the Executive Director at **Friends of the Sangamon Valley** with a bang. That should surprise no one though, as Ms. Funk comes to the role with over three decades of conservation experience, including 19 years as Director of the Sugar Grove Nature Center in McLean County, so she knows a thing or two about conservation in Illinois. She fills the big burn suit of Mr. **Vern LaGesse**, under whose leadership the organization established a network of preserves stretching well beyond the titular Sangamon County, and whose influence and legacy are felt from one end of the state to the other.
- ✿ I mentioned this briefly last year, but it bears repeating. **Cynthia Kanner** has joined the **Prairie State Conservation Coalition** as its inaugural Executive Director. Ms. Kanner comes to her new position with long experience in the state, with over 30 years in the nonprofit sector, serving with the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County for 15 years, and leading the organization over the last four. More immediately, she's largely responsible for all the great stuff PSCC has done over the last year, and for the similarly ambitious plans for the year to come.

✿ **Victoria Livingston** has taken on the task of guiding the **Prairie Land Conservancy**, where she most recently served as Program Coordinator. This means that she was a part of *all* of the conservation goodness the organization achieved this year that you just read about. In her spare time teaching biology and environmental science at the college level for 15 years, Ms. Livingston succeeds **David King** – who from my perspective is basically responsible for making the Conservancy what it is today. Mr. King has helmed the organization since well before the first of these yearly missives landed in your inbox, and so was central to all of the projects you’ve *ever* read about in these pages. It’s the diversity of those preserves and easements that’s long captured my attention; from a 500+ acre preserve established in partnership with the USFWS and some of the biggest conservation and grant making organizations in the business to small preserves donated by dedicated landowners throughout the Conservancy’s vast service area and everything in between, Mr. King has led a deeply impressive organization, and one whose influence and strength at the close of his tenure are orders of magnitude greater than they were at its opening.

✿ As summer gave way to fall, the **Boone County Conservation District** welcomed **Josh Sage** as its new Executive Director. OK, so a lot of times when I’m writing these, I need to rely on the invariably tedious press releases put out by the communications folks during the proverbial changing of the guard to learn what the new gal or guy’s qualifications might be, but that is without question *not* the case here. Mr. Sage is the District’s longtime Natural Resources Manager, in which capacity I’ve had both the pleasure and privilege of working with him and in so doing learning about the myriad preserves the District so expertly maintains, providing extensive recreational opportunities to the community while managing and restoring some really neat ecological communities. He takes over from **Dan Kane**, a visionary in the truest sense of that word who played an outsized role in protecting those places in the first place. Mr. Kane guided the District through the greatest expansion in its 80+ year history, as it more than doubled in size to nearly 4,000 acres across the County, heavily focusing on the Kishwaukee River and its tributaries, in particular Piscasaw Creek – stretches of which are among the most biologically intact waterways in the entirety of the state. Like, the whole state. Yeah, I know; it surprised me too. You really should consider getting out to see the truly gorgeous results; I for one was left slack-jawed the first time I saw the thing.

Congratulations; you made it to the end of reading this, and I made it to the end of writing it. I’m honestly uncertain which is the greater achievement, but I lean towards the former. Thanks for once again joining me as we looked back on the year that was, and see you next time!

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.