



# 2025 Year In Review

## Annual Report of Land Conservation & Policy Achievements in Illinois



*Illinois Beach State Park*



*Pere Marquette State Park*



*Burlington Forest Preserve  
Kane County*

*Photos by Cynthia Kanner*

## *About Prairie State Conservation Coalition*

The year 2025 not only marked the organization's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which was celebrated at its annual conference in March, but it was also a turning point for Prairie State Conservation Coalition (PSCC). At the end of 2024, PSCC, a collective voice for land conservation in Illinois with member organizations that include conservation land trusts and other non-profits, restoration companies, and both local and state-wide government agencies, received the last grant before the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation closed its doors after 25 years.

With that very generous grant, in 2025, PSCC began organizing its own granting-making program to support natural habitats through three focus areas - land acquisition, stewardship and capacity building. The land acquisition program was successfully launched and by year's end \$1.7 million was awarded to several organizations around the state, some of which are highlighted in this report. 2025 was an exciting year that began a new chapter in the organization's history.

Find out more about PSCC's mission, programming, networking opportunities, and membership at [prairiestateconservation.org](http://prairiestateconservation.org).

Happy New Year!



Cynthia Kanner, Executive Director

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## *2025 – Year in Review*

The days are lengthening and the calendar has turned, and so it is with some pleasure and greater relief that I bid you welcome to this look back at the many projects and initiatives that came to fruition over what by any definition was an eventful 2025. Enjoy this retrospective, but for some inexplicable reason looking for more of my verbose musings? No problem, as all of the reports from 2019-‘24 are readily [available](#) for your discerning perusal.

This annual compendium is again coming to you in coordination with the Prairie State Conservation Coalition. If you’re not familiar with the organization, scroll back up a page for an excellent summary of their work. As I’ve said before, it’s the support and resources the group brings to bear that helps its members achieve such heights that it takes this weighty annual tome just 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 readers old and new to *2025 in Review*. What are we reviewing you might ask? As always, a little bit of everything. Over the next 60-odd pages, we’ll be taking a look at:

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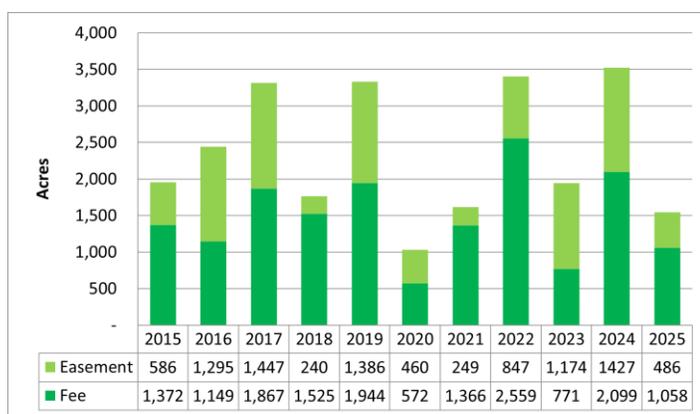
Canoeing on the Lower Fox River. (Cynthia Kanner)



## Private Sector Land Conservation

To call Illinois' conservation land trusts irreplaceable is to understate the matter. Some are hyper local, providing open spaces and educational programs to young and old alike throughout their communities. Others operate at large scales, preserving rich farmland or establishing expansive natural refuges, sometimes independently, sometimes as essential partners with public institutions. Still others have incubated some of the most ambitious conservation initiatives of our era, from restoring vast floodplain wetlands to returning bison to the state's landscape after more than a century's absence. Whatever the goal, it all comes back to one overriding mission – to protect the land that is our common heritage. And last year they once again did exactly that, preserving 1,543.5 acres in projects both large and small.

I've never met a soul who likes drawn out introductions, so let's get the annual reminder of how the numbers on that increasingly crowded bar chart are derived out of the way so we can get started. Over the coming pages, I discuss every land protection project that closed over the past year, but only include *newly protected* sites in the acreage totals; otherwise we'd be double counting, and no one wants



that. If a previously protected property is transferred from one organization to another, or a new layer of protection placed over a property that had already been preserved via some other tool, it's thus not included in the graph. *Also* – and this applies to a couple of projects this year – if a private land trust collaborated with a public entity to protect some property or another such that they both held title or an easement for a time (for example, a land trust might purchase a property and then immediately sell it to the public agency), the acreage of the project site is divided equally between the Private and Public sector graphs in this report. All right then. Phew! The boring stuff is out of the way. Shall we begin?



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

## ✿ Ducks Unlimited

1) In my continuing effort to pay the bills, I've had the pleasure of engaging with a wide, wide assortment of land trusts across a good chunk of the Great Lakes region. This being the case, I think I can assert with some confidence that few organizations have had a greater continuing impact on the growth of the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge system than Ducks Unlimited. That work was exemplified last year by two projects in southern Illinois. The first features 38.9 acres in Pulaski County, just over a mile from the Ohio River and county seat of Mound City and a hop, skip, and jump from the southernmost tip of the ginormous Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, of which it will eventually become a part. This agricultural field will be restored to wetland, as was the neighboring 72.7-acres before it, having been added to the Refuge in 2020. What's that you say? I didn't mention a 72.7-acre addition to the NWR in that year's edition of this report? No, no I did not, due to the fact that I only discovered said property in the process of writing this piece and, yes, that's extremely irritating.



2) Switching rivers, we move over to Alexander County and the Mississippi. In contrast with its upland peer to the east, this 249.56-acre property (all but 100 acres of which was previously protected via a variety of NRCS conservation easements) sits upon the river's eastern bank. A spit of forest along the waterway overlooks what historically was largely a mix of open water and agricultural fields, but following severe flooding in 2019 – this is part of the Dogtooth Bend area that we've discussed in the past and will again later in



Southern Illinois at its finest.  
(*Cynthia Kanner - PSCC*)

this very report, so do a keyword search if you need a primer – has had a fair bit more water than land. The property will one day be integrated into the Middle Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge, which stretches south intermittently along both sides of its namesake from St. Louis to this exact spot, with a large unit of the Refuge located on the opposite bank in neighboring Missouri.

### ☛ Friends of Nachusa Grasslands

3) Friends of Nachusa Grasslands is a new entry to these pages, and a welcome one at that. The organization has long been dedicated to supporting their namesake – Illinois’ original and most successful tallgrass prairie restoration, and home to the state’s first herd of wild bison in two centuries – through endowments, advocacy, stewardship, and scientific study. Unbeknownst to me (more on that later), two years ago they branched out in a new and exciting direction – *land protection*. Case in



Fun fact; this now fully grown calf was the first wild bison born in Illinois since 1872.

(Bill Kleiman)



point is a 191.7-acre (194 gross acres) tract of open agricultural fields and closed woodlands, the latter cut through by a small tributary of Franklin Creek. Positioned at the southeastern corner of the prairie, the land sits adjacent to a large TNC-held conservation easement. I’ll be honest; it never occurred to me that the grasslands might eventually expand in this direction, and that pleasant surprise is one of the conservation highlights of my year.

### ☛ Friends of the Kankakee

4) This report wouldn’t feel complete without a visit to what is arguably one of the most engaging projects in the state, and what is inarguably the most inspirational. Friends of the Kankakee is the singular force behind the creation of the Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area. Located at the northeastern tip of Iroquois County, FOK has, for thirty years, been building that refuge largely through the acquisition of individual lots in a platted but mostly unbuilt subdivision. Their ultimate vision is that the refuge serve as the connective tissue knitting together into a single whole natural lands already held by the Illinois and Indiana DNRs to the west, north, and east. It’s to that end that last summer the Friends acquired another 2.0 acres spread across three parcels. They followed this up several months later with a less traditional transaction, trading a 1.75-acre parcel at the far southern end of the project area (outlined in red on the map at right) for 0.55-acres in the north. As you can see, this had the effect of further building up a critical mass of protected land in the northern core which, to my mind, makes it an excellent deal.



## ✿ Grand Prairie Friends

5) If you've been in this space for just about any length of time, you have *at least* a passing familiarity with the Warbler Ridge Conservation Area outside the City of Charleston. And, to be honest, probably much more than just a passing familiarity, because this may well be the single most remarkable greenfield conservation project in the state.

Begun a bit over a decade ago, this notable assemblage of what was at the beginning of the year already over a thousand acres parallels the Embarras River, coming close to linking over 2,600 acres owned by the municipality and the Department of Natural Resources. To that has been added the appropriately named Warbler Bend preserve, situated along a bend in the river.



An aptly named site. (*Grand Prairie Friends*)



Adjacent to the municipal land, this precisely 110.0-acre property is a largely wooded wonderland punctuated by a smattering of fields. It joins an established and dare I say notably successful restoration and enhancement project providing habitat for nesting Little Brown and Tri-Colored bats. Connectivity, habitat, scale, multiple public/private partnerships; GPF has put on a masterclass in effective conservation, and IMO it's one we'd all do well to learn from!

## ✿ Great Rivers Land Trust

6) Having glanced at the aerial photo, you probably think I'm about to spend two paragraphs pontificating on the value of adding depth to a preserve, perhaps intercut with an aside on the dense woodland that occupies this 5-acre parcel northwest of the city Alton in southern Madison County. Wouldn't be the first time, right? After all, there's a minimum amount of space that I need to fill with each of these things. Well, if that's where you thought this one was going, you're wrong, because this is the Great Rivers Land Trust, people; there is *always* a story to be told with any project they take on.

See, this small property is merely the latest success in an initiative that the Trust has been working on for over two decades. The Piasa Creek Watershed Project has seen the creation of a string of preserves along both the namesake waterway and its tributary, Rocky Fork. One of the highlights of this work is a miles long trail along the latter's bank that features





unbroken views of the natural world. As you'll note, that bank comes right up to the edge of this new parcel; twice, in fact. Not coincidentally, at present the trail crosses the creek twice at this same location. With the addition in hand, that's about to become a thing of the past. The trail will be rerouted to remain one of side of the creek, not only making maintenance a heck of a lot easier, but also a good deal drier, given the stream's habit of regularly overflowing its banks. On top of that, the property is part of the Rocky Fork Network to Freedom Underground Railroad Historic Site. A more important piece of cultural history I have difficulty imagining. *All* of that from a single, five-acre parcel. (Photo credit: Alley Ringhausen – GRLT)

### ✿ HeartLands Conservancy

7) There're a host of reasons one might place an easement over a piece of land. It might add depth to an existing preserve, or square off a boundary. Maybe it offers recreational opportunities, or has cultural resonance. Perhaps it hosts habitat or flora that are ... .. *vitaly important* ... .. to the viability of an endangered species (yeah, you thought I was going to use *that* word there, didn't you? *Didn't you?* You should know me better by this point). But sometimes, it's as simple as wanting to preserve a place of bucolic repose from the pressures of modernity. Such was the case at this 11.1-acre property northwest of Carbondale in Jackson County, protecting mature trees that shade a turfgrass field.



Shooting Stars (*Diana Krug*)

8) In days gone by, the owners of a family farm in Fayette County, southwest of Vandalia, took what probably seemed at the time to be an insignificant step in choosing to set aside a small, 15.3-acre piece of the property for the benefit of the wildlife all around them. Dominated by steep hills cut through by two streams – tributaries of the nearby Kaskaskia River – the land likely seemed ill-suited to agricultural cultivation. That choice made in decades past has echoed down to the present day, giving space for a vibrant, open oak/hickory forest complimented by maples and ferns that flank fields of wildflowers.



Screech owls and eastern wild turkeys patrol both the canopy and forest floor, while long-tailed weasels hunt among the fallen vegetation and a multitude of amphibians meander along the waterways. All are now forever protected thanks to the generosity of the former landowner, who donated the entire property, creating the Gutierrez Family Forest, making eternal that simple decision made all those many years ago.



The Gutierrez Family Forest (*HeartLands Conservancy*)

9) I've seen a fair number of unusual land acquisition projects over the years, but the appropriately named American Bottom Farm just off the banks of the Mississippi south of St. Louis in St. Clair County was a new one for me. I say "just off the banks" because in generously donating this 82.6-acre property that mixes agricultural field with bottomland forest, the landowner retained a narrow stretch of land a few dozen feet wide paralleling the riverbank to facilitate the transit of the barges that are the lifeblood of trade throughout the American Midwest, transporting commodities up and down the central artery of the continent. At the same time, the gift thus ensures that highly productive alluvial farmland remains exactly that, and keeps the riverfront open for the scenic enjoyment of resident and barge hand alike.



10) The year 2019 featured an auspicious event – the registration of the first Land & Water Reserve in Williamson County. This followed the dedication, three years prior, of the county’s first Nature Preserve; both established by one visionary man working to restore, in one small place, the vibrant wooded landscape that once defined the entire region.



The 111.5-acre Grisley Woods was an excellent place to start. Largely a mix of Grade C dry-mesic upland forest and bottomland forest, this actively managed property is characterized by a wide variety of oaks, paired with shagbark hickory and green ash in the higher elevations while joined by American sycamore in the lowland. Those forests host a multitude of rare birds, including more than a few of the state endangered variety. Why am I writing about a site protected over five years ago? Because that same visionary landowner – who over decades has ably restored and managed the property – took action to ensure that it would continue to be effectively cared for long after he is gone, by donating to HeartLands Conservancy the entire preserve.

#### ✿ Illinois Audubon Society

11) There are, I think, few conservation pursuits more noble in this state than the effort to return to vibrancy the greater prairie chicken; once numbering in the millions, driven to near extinction a century past. Those efforts, as most of you know, are centered on the two Prairie Ridge State Natural Areas in Jasper and Marion counties. Prairie chickens need large open expanses to thrive, something the Illinois Audubon Society is well aware of, which is why they’ve long been the central force driving the expansion of both of these state lands. IAS was at it again last



year, this time at the larger of the two sites, south of Newton in Jasper County. An 81.5-acre agricultural field on the west side of the site is the newest addition to this growing assemblage. In common with Loy Prairie over in Marion County – detailed in these pages just last year – the land was purchased at auction by IAS’ inimitable team, and also in common with that preserve it will eventually be deeded to the DNR for formal incorporation into the growing State Natural Area. *(Photo credit: IAS)*

## ✿ Illinois Climbers Association

12) This is admittedly a break from the usual. Rock climbing probably isn't the first activity that springs to mind when you think land conservation – particularly in Illinois – but it's a very real one, and a very real motivator to conserve and, as importantly, make these vertical resources available to the public. And that's where the Illinois Climbers Association comes into play. Working throughout the southern part of the state, the ICA has historically partnered with public agencies to open challenging rock faces to climbers, taking on the responsibility of providing infrastructure and the like. More recently, the Association took the novel step of acquiring a property of its own to further expand climbing opportunities; the Holy Boulders & House Boulders sites in southwestern Jackson County, adjacent to the Shawnee National Forest.



Holy Boulders – in the north – was acquired in 2016, with its neighbor House Boulders purchased in 2021, both with the support of The Access Fund – a national rock climbing advocacy group – and both without my knowledge, which is why you're only hearing about them now. Last November saw changes to both of these sister sites, with the exchange of 5.95 acres at House Boulders (outlined in red) for 5.406 acres (outlined in yellow) adjacent to its northern neighbor.

## ✿ Lake Forest Open Lands Association

13) In its nearly six-decade history, the Lake Forest Open Lands Association has seen and done a lot. So much, in fact, that you'd be forgiven for thinking there's nothing new under the sun for this august organization. That would be a mistake, because the closing days of the year saw the establishment of its new headquarters at the Nagel Campus – 3.8 acres on the west side of the Middlefork Savanna Forest Preserve. This isn't some greenfield development either. No, the centerpiece is a 16,000 sq. ft. modern office building *donated* by – to my mind staggeringly generous – longtime supporters of the Association who previously used the space as the headquarters of their own nationwide business. In addition to housing LFOLA's offices, the new center will also house their operations center (made possible by the building's 2,500 sq. ft. garage), a woodshop, and a native plant nursery.



You might wonder what this means for the Association's existing HQ. Far from being abandoned, it's being transformed into the Conservation Center, hosting all of LFOLA's many community programs. This is a role the facility has already played for many years, but the entire site will be getting an upgrade, being both refreshed and expanded over the course of this new year. This entire project is by any definition a big deal; one that I'm going to relish watching come to full fruition over the coming months.

## ✿ Land Conservation Foundation

14) Properly establishing and setting up a new preserve is, I think most reading this will readily agree, often a...let us call it resource-heavy undertaking. Just clearing out the invasives can be a years-long effort, let alone restoring the place to its former ecological glory. Such was most definitely *not* the case at the 143.8-acre Jasmine Hollow preserve in Piatt County, southwest of the city of Monticello. Why? Because Jasmine Hollow isn't just Jasmine Hollow. It's the Jasmine Hollow *Land & Water Reserve*.

This combination of floodplain and upland forest has been stewarded for over 25 years by a dedicated couple who've given not only their time and resources but now the land itself, donating to the Foundation what is by definition one of Illinois' ecological treasures. The silver maple and hackberry floodplain forest isn't even the best part of this impressive property, nor is the oak-hickory upland. No, that distinction goes to the Sangamon River, which flows



for a mile through the preserve. At least 11 species of mussel make this stretch of the river their home; any waterway with ten or more mussel species is considered by the experts to be of high quality. Still not convinced? Well, that quality is further demonstrated by the prolific presence of mudpuppies; a state-threatened amphibian. It's an awesome site made possible by an equally awesome landowner. (Photo credit: LCF)



## ✿ Natural Land Institute

15) When I start work to map and describe a newly protected property, it's a multistep process. The initial step though is figuring out where the heck this site that I likely know nothing about is located. So, when I saw that NLI had established a conservation easement on a 40.44-acre parcel in western Carroll County, my first thought was that this was a simple agricultural easement; the Back 40, if you will. How wrong I was.

No, what we have here is a combination oak/hickory forest and savanna, complemented by a small wetland seep. The land is also topographically varied – perhaps the reason it wasn't long ago put to the plough – and sits a short distance from a tributary of East Johnson Creek, so that forest does double duty, offering habitat for local critters while simultaneously anchoring soil that would otherwise quickly find itself flowing into the nearby Mississippi.



16) There's quite a bit to recommend the aptly named Blair Road Woodlands just northwest of the Village of Pecatonica in western Winnebago County. Reasonable people can disagree, but to my mind, the unquestioned highlight is a dense canopy of old growth trees arching over the namesake road, mingling with those of the Pecatonica Wetlands Forest Preserve on the opposite side of the street to create a shaded archway of wood and leaf that runs for over half a mile. There's a lot more to this 21-acre woodland than simply being a municipal highway official's worst nightmare though. The dry-mesic upland forest sits atop a ridge, protecting a spring which empties into the nearby public preserve. That forest has been selectively cleared over the years, but is unlikely to have ever been clearcut. White oak and black maple in the west of the new preserve are joined by red oak as you move east, towering over a healthy understory nearly devoid of the woodland invasives that plague much of the region. It's a biologically rich, visually sublime spot.



See what I mean? (*Natural Land Institute*)

## ✿ Openlands

17) So, last year I devoted a fair amount of digital ink to extolling the legitimately shocking acquisition of 946 acres in McHenry County by The Conservation Fund, with major financial support from the Illinois Audubon Society and Openlands – the latter of whom also took ownership of part of the site. Destined for eventual incorporation into the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge (as it happens, jump ahead about forty pages for some impressive movement on that front), the property is a mix of agricultural fields and wetlands. Take a look at the deed by which The Fund took ownership of the property though, and you'll find that the acquisition included a decent amount of additional land - land that I didn't include in my description of the project last year. What's up with that?



Well, the USFWS didn't want the entire farm. However - and this will shock you - the landowner didn't want to just sell *most of* the property. If they were going to sell, they were going to sell *all of* it thank you very much. A small, 1.7-acre strip of land just east of the main body of the site is one of those pieces of the original farm that was never identified as a future part of the Refuge. So what to do with it? Openlands had an answer. Previously used by the farm's private owner for parking, the land trust astutely observed that, well, why not keep doing that? And so it will be. The parcel adjoins the McHenry County Conservation District's North Trail, in addition to obviously being perfectly positioned to provide future access to the Refuge taking shape opposite the trail. Openlands will hold the property until the local municipality has the financial capacity to both acquire and manage the land, making this one a win for all involved.

18) Stretching along Spring Creek between Orland Park and New Lenox, the Hadley Valley Forest Preserve, as I once observed in these pages, is one of my favorite sites in Will County. Why? In large part because almost two decades ago, Openlands and the Forest Preserve District - with funding from a wetland mitigation project - worked together to re-meander over a mile and a half of the stream as it wends its way to the Des Plaines River. And that's just plain awesome in both scale and vision.



The partnership remains robust to this day, most recently and visibly in the form of 81.6 acres of overgrown but mature oak-hickory forest on the south side of the preserve immediately adjacent to that aforementioned re-meandered stream. Acquired with support from the ***Prairie State Conservation Coalition***, Openlands will hold the property until the public agency is ready to assume ownership, adding forest to the vibrant wetlands and prairies that twenty years of restoration and dedicated care have transformed into an expansive vista showcasing the ecological heart of the County.



The wooded expanse on the far end of this restored valley? That's the newly protected oak-hickory forest.  
(Openlands)

## ✿ The Conservation Foundation

19) Open forest and agricultural fields. At the intersection of two major roads. Residential and commercial development stretching out as far as the eye can see in almost every direction. Established plans in place for a major commercial development, awaiting only final municipal approval. It doesn't take an oracle to know where this is going.

Except...it didn't go there. Neighbors of this 120.6-acre property in the village of West Dundee were none too happy with plans for the site, and so they organized to stop it. And won; the Village declined to approve the development plan, paving the way for The Conservation Foundation to purchase the site on behalf of the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, who will take on the land once they've gotten the financing lined up.



This mix of forest and field will be an addition to the 155.9-acre Schweitzer Woods Forest Preserve and, to my mind, an eminently appropriate one at that. Ms. Emily Schweitzer donated the property to the District in 1989, asking only that the land be forever maintained as passive open space. Her gift to the community now has its counterpoint in the dedication of that same community, who embraced her vision and rallied together to expand it beyond anything she likely ever thought possible.

20) Just northwest of the city of Morris, on the open plains of Grundy County is what for me at least is an unexpected sight; the broad, meandering west fork of Nettle Creek as it snakes its way towards the nearby Illinois River – I'm serious, so far as I can tell there's been barely any channelization across its entire run which, yeah, surprising to say the least. Woods hug the banks of the stream throughout much of this run, which taken together with its natural twists and turns may well be why it's home to a



healthy, diverse population of mussels. Beyond the trees, farmland stretches away in all directions. Stream, wood, and crop all come together on this 112.4-acre easement (114.3 gross acres). Observing the steady march of commercial and industrial development, the longtime landowner worked with the Foundation to ensure that such will never be the fate of this land she loves, instead seeing it protected for all the generations yet to come. *(Photo credit: TCF)*



21) Aux Sable Creek is one of those rare Illinois waterways whose biological integrity is matched only by its diversity. A largely unchannelized tributary of the Illinois River, the creek has starred in a fair number of these annual reports over the last few years courtesy of the Foundation, which is no surprise given that its protection has, for very good reason, long been one of their highest priority focus areas.

Perhaps the most intriguing of these projects lay five miles up from the mouth of the creek as the water flows but only two miles as the bird flies (as I said; it *somehow* retains much of its original meandering nature). This is a 19.8-acre preserve in northeastern Grundy County discussed in these

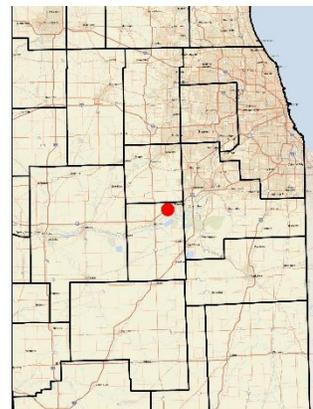


pages two years back. As I wrote at the time, the land was acquired by the Foundation after first being purchased by two dedicated siblings who did so to ensure the wooded property wouldn't be developed. Why? Because they have a vision; a vision of a protected corridor running along creek and river from Minooka in the east to Morris in the west. It's a vision they've long planned to make manifest by bequeathing to the Conservation Foundation their 109.82-acre

wooded refuge astride both banks of Aux Sable Creek that they've so ably stewarded for decades. Rather than a bequest, they instead elected to donate that land last month, giving life to the new and appropriately named Threeridge Preservation Area, where forests on slope and rise watch over the winding creek below. To my mind, there're only two words to say in response to the pairing of that great vision with their even greater generosity of spirit, inadequate though those words may be: "Thank you." (Photo credit: TCF)

22) I write a lot about "future trail corridors" or properties that are another "link that will eventually connect" one site with another. To be honest, it's gotten to the point that it verges on the cliché. Which is one of the reasons I'm stoked about the Foundation's latest partnership with a municipal park district. Because get this; a property acquired in the closing days of the year has *finished* building such a corridor. Like, done. "*Brought to a state of completion.*" per the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

Overlooking the west bank of the Fox River, this 2.3-acre parcel is flanked by two sites owned by the Fox Valley Park District. As you can likely imagine, this one has understandably been a priority for said District for a good long while. Because TCF has an unparalleled track record working with municipalities to build their land portfolios, it was an easy call for the public



agency to ask for their assistance. It took over half a decade, but the Foundation and landowner reached an agreement and, in back-to-back closings, acquired the property from the seller, and then in turn sold it to the Park District, which – and this is a nice close – is considering the installation of a public canoe launch at this, the final piece of a corridor that was long in the making.

23) Keeping with the Fox River beat but moving downstream, we come to Camp Tuckabatchee, north of Ottawa in LaSalle County. Established nearly a century ago, the youth camp is a



topographic treasure trove of sandstone bluffs and steep valleys, cut through by two tributaries of said river, located less than a mile to the east. Oak savanna, a healthy wetland seep (so healthy that it's part of the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory) and remnant prairie intermingle across 192.5 acres (193.5 gross acres), hosting at least 230 native plant species, including the State Threatened Forked Aster, seen in the photo at left so you know I'm not trying to pull one over on you. (*Photo credit: TCF*)



This geographic and floristic wonderland has been devoted since 1927 to connecting kids with nature; appropriately enough, it's one of those same kids who, decades after forming a lifelong bond with the camp, was responsible for its preservation. Now a restoration volunteer with the Foundation, they connected camp and land trust, establishing a relationship that, with the support of ***The Conservation Fund***, its partnerships with both the NRCS' Regional Conservation Partnership Program and the ***Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation***, and a generous private donor resulted in the establishment of a conservation easement that will forever protect forest and bluff, prairie and wetland alike while providing the camp with the financial resources to make much-needed repairs; quite the legacy for that long ago camper who made it a reality.



I *did* say it was a topographic treasure. (TCF)

## ✿ The Land Conservancy of McHenry County

24-25) I've written about the awesomeness of The Land Conservancy on many an occasion over the years, but if anything have undersold the case. What can I say; it's a skill issue. I'll try and do better. Anyhow, case in point, agriculture. There are trusts that specialize in natural lands, trusts that specialize in farmland protection, but precious few that excel at *both*. TLC is a case study in what skilled and dedicated professionals can bring to land conservation of all types, and they demonstrated that again last year with neighboring agricultural easements on land owned respectively by two siblings. Located northeast of the Village of Richmond, the first easement takes in 10 agricultural acres



(Photo credit: Linda Balek – TLC)

and an accompanying farmstead, while the second, at 39.1 acres does the same, also incorporating a decently sized oak savanna at its northern end. As I wrote last year when discussing a different TLC project, protecting family farms in an urbanizing environment requires not only knowledge and skill, but *empathy*; the ability to understand the hopes and needs of the land's owners, and to craft a solution that meets both. When you combine all three together? Well, the results speak for themselves.



26) We're changing scale a bit with this next one, in the form of what is easily the Conservancy's smallest preserve – and when their previous smallest preserve was a cemetery prairie discussed just last year that comes in under an acre, that's saying something. Exchanging open grassland for closed forest, what we have here is 0.26 acres of mature old growth oaks on a sloped hillside overlooking a stream that's largely surrounded by residential subdivisions. I say "largely" because the site is adjacent to an existing 0.7-acre conservation easement established nearly thirty years ago, which is a fine case study in the value of patience. Similarly studded with mature oaks, taken together the two sites offer a modest but real visual and ecological relief from and for the surrounding residences.



27) If you thought I might be engaged in a bit of hyperbole earlier when expounding on the impressive agricultural conservation program the Conservancy has built, I do believe this next project more than proves my case. Spring Hill Farm, on the outskirts of the village of Wonder Lake, was homesteaded in 1849. And in the nearly two centuries since, it has remained in the care of that same family that first put plough to soil. And what a family it is. See, the land yields far more than crops; it's also home to one of the finest fen communities in the state, something they not only recognized but took action on, dedicating the site over three decades ago as an Illinois Nature Preserve.



That however was only the start, as all involved recognized the value of extending that protection to the entirety of the property. And that's where TLC came in. Working with both the landowners and the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, they created a two-pronged land conservation initiative. The remaining portions of the farm that have been restored or maintained as natural areas were dedicated as Nature Preserve, while the agricultural land and accompanying farmstead – 80.2 acres – were placed in a

conservation easement, securing its future as both an agricultural and ecological jewel in the heart of the county. *(Photo credit: Claire Hodge – TLC)*



There's really nothing I can add to either of these photos; they speak for themselves.  
*(Linda Balek – TLC)*

## ✿ The Nature Conservancy

28-29) We're back at Dogtooth Bend in southern Alexander County, where I must ask for your indulgence. While it's been ongoing since 2020, it was only two years ago that I learned of the hugely successful partnership between the Natural Resources Conservation Service and TNC in this frequently waterlogged corner of the state. It being ongoing, a year later I thus found myself penning an overview of the larger initiative to introduce and provide context to 2024's land acquisitions. Right, so another twelve months have come and gone, which means there are *new* projects to discuss! Which is a good thing! However, I can't really improve on the summary I wrote a year ago, so am going to copy and paste, with thanks for your understanding of my rhetorical limitations.



Very good then. Dogtooth Bend – so named because the meandering of the Mississippi River in the area has resulted in a peninsula of [said shape](#) – is a low-lying floodplain protected by several levees that over the last several decades have done a less than stellar job at leveeing.



This used to be farmland. (TNC)

Following truly massive breaches in 2011 and 2019 that in addition to flooding thousands of acres resulted in the deposition of *tens* of thousands of tons of sand on former farmland, TNC and the NRCS initiated a program that enables landowners to sell conservation easements to the government agency, with the land

being restored to native vegetation by the Service, which the owners often then plan to lease for hunting. For those who wish to exit from the property entirely, TNC will purchase the now eased land (so that's two payments to the landowner for land of otherwise limited economic potential) and continue the restoration. And that's precisely what this premier land trust did last year, acquiring two properties totaling 330.56 acres.



Hackberry emperor along a trail. (Diana Krug)

30) Most anyone who has read this annual missive of mine for any length of time knows that I am forever fascinated by the Nachusa Grasslands, and humbled by the skill and dedication of the team that have recreated – from scratch – a thriving tallgrass prairie that to the best of my knowledge is second to no other in the state. And I’m not the only one, as they’ve long been supported by the volunteer organization ***Friends of Nachusa Grasslands***, who last year sold to the Conservancy 6.5 semi-wooded acres (inclusive of a half interest in about an acre and a half that contains an access lane, the other portion already being held by TNC) originally acquired in 2023 adjacent to the Nachusa HQ – which, I think we can all agree, would have made for an incongruent sight if it had instead been paved over for a development.



31-32) The Emiquon preserve is something special, as evidenced by the fact that there are in fact *two* Emiquons – the 6,675-acre TNC property, and the adjacent ~2,590-acre Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge (with the 6,650-acre Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge on the opposite bank of the Illinois River). Much of these twin sites were agricultural fields at the turn of the millennium, and for a very good reason. They sat atop what were once alluvial lakes that gave rise to an exceptionally biologically rich ecosystem. This in turn facilitated the growth of human settlement, most notably in the form of what is today known as Dixon Mounds, established on a bluff overlooking the river around the year 800 and thriving for centuries thereafter.



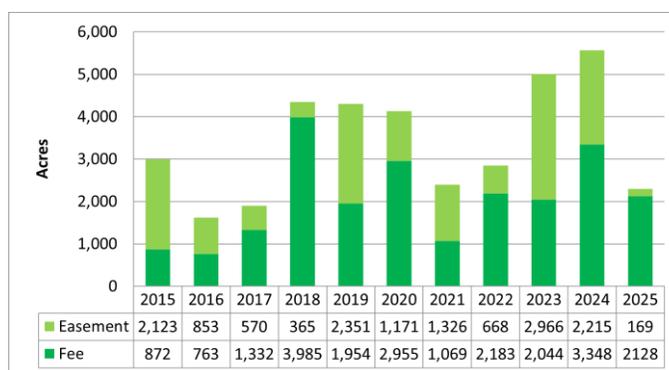
Over the course of the late 1990s and early 2000s, TNC and the USFWS set out to restore this vast wetland – and I do mean vast, as it’s the largest wetland restoration in the U.S. outside of the Everglades – and have they ever succeeded. Today Emiquon is once again a thriving biological tableau, just as it was when the indigenous communities of Dixon Mounds looking across this bountiful vista hunted and fished the land a thousand years ago.

That symbiotic relationship between man and nature makes the Conservancy’s acquisition of 107.7 acres across two geographically distinct parcels doubly significant. The first – of 30.3 acres – connects two units of the Dixon Mounds State Museum and thus was subsequently sold to the Illinois DNR, which means you’ll be hearing a lot more about it once we get to the Public Sector section of this report. The second, of 77.4 acres, is similarly connective, with the agricultural field linking two largely wooded units of the National Wildlife Refuge. This parcel will in turn likely be transferred to the USFWS later this year, meaning we’ll be returning to this exceptional place once again in next year’s report!

## Public Sector Land Conservation

I've said this before, but it most assuredly bears repeating – there's no practical way to overstate the impact or import of Illinois' public lands. It is from these spaces that some of the state's greatest conservation successes have grown. It is within those same refuges that most experience the natural world, and thus where its appreciation is cultivated. At the quarter century mark of the 2000s, the public sector in all its varied forms protected 2,296.6 acres\* from one end of the state to the other; from the cypress swamps where the Ohio meets the Mississippi, to the forests and plains rolling off a lake so vast it could encompass entire countries.

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) with both elements closing within the year, each party received credit for one half of the property's total acreage.



\* OK, not really. The Natural Resources Conservation Service routinely protects hundreds of acres each year via conservation easement. Vexingly, federal policies are at present leaning away from transparency such that the Service no longer makes publicly available information on its protected lands. I'll update the numbers in future reports should that information ever be released.



Cache River State Natural Area (Cynthia Kanner - PSCC)

## ✿ Byron Forest Preserve District

1) The city of Byron has a good deal going for it, including a fantastic view of the Rock River, along which it was founded. But we're not focused on that mighty waterway today in this, our first public sector project of the year. No, no I instead direct you to one of the river's tributaries, the humble Mill Creek, and more specifically the 73.6-acre Mill Creek Wetlands preserve on its eastern bank that last featured in these pages two years ago when a local nonprofit protected the wooded wetlands immediately to its east. This is one of those rare cases where "more of the same" is an unquestionably *good* thing, and that's exactly what we have here, with a 3.0-acre addition of woodlands both dry and wet. Nothing deep with this one, but then, it doesn't have to be.



Blood Root (*Diana Krug*)

## ✿ Campton Township Open Space District

2) Corron Farm is a special – and unusual – place, combining historic preservation of a nearly two century old farmstead with hundreds of acres of prairie and wetland – all in the midst of bustling residential communities. Also unusual is the fantastically productive partnership between Campton Township and The Conservation Foundation. As long-time readers may recall, in 2023, The Foundation purchased 112.6 acres in agricultural production adjacent to the Farm, committing to hold the land until the Township Open Space District could purchase the property.

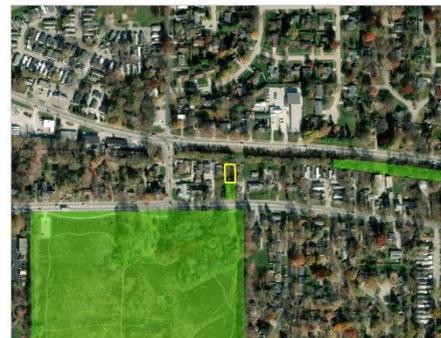


This wasn't fresh ground for either organization, as they had first joined forces to do the same with an adjacent 129-acre site two years earlier that, coincidentally, was deeded to the Township right around the time the Foundation was closing on this new property. Two years on, and history has repeated itself, with the District acquiring the land as an addition to the now 460.8-acre site. Taken together, these two projects have more than doubled the size of the original site (which was itself not too shabby in the acreage department), which I for one contend is as fantastic as it is unexpected.

### ✿ Champaign County Forest Preserve District

3) This one is something of a déjà vu. One year ago in this space we covered the Kickapoo Rail Trail. As I wrote at the time, the trail *“runs or will run for over 20 miles from western Vermilion County through to Urbana in neighboring Champaign. While at present it stops about half a mile west of the city’s Weaver Park, both the FPD and the appropriately named Friends of the Kickapoo Rail Trail have been acquiring land with the aim of ultimately linking the two together.”* The

Friends that year had decided to the District a 0.15-acre parcel that, as I further explained, was *“one of a trifecta of small properties that would do exactly that, with additional positive developments expected in the near future.”* Well, since you’re reading this, you’ve likely deduced what happened next. There were indeed additional “positive developments” in the near future, in the form of the acquisition of the second of that aforementioned trifecta of small parcels, this one also 0.15 acres in size.



### ✿ Forest Preserves of Cook County

4) I didn’t cover it at the time both because this annual report was still fairly new and also because even then I rarely touched on municipal projects on account of the fact there’re around 1,300 municipalities in the state and there’s just no way I’m tracking the activities of all of ‘em, but in 2017 the owners of a landscape and nursery business donated 23.9 acres of woodland, wetland and stream to the Village of Orland Park; the George Gianakas Nature Preserve – in honor of their late son. This ornithological delight was paired with an adjacent 3.2 acres that the Village subsequently developed into a nature center that, I must say, is quite the [welcoming locale](#). Located directly east of the

Forest Preserve District’s McGinnis Slough, village and district came to the conclusion that the county agency was best positioned to take on the long-term management of both the center and adjoining nature preserve, and so this special site has now taken its place as part of the oldest and largest Forest Preserve District in our good state.



Woodland slope (Diana Krug)

5-8) In the 2024 edition of this report I discussed a neat new Forest Preserve that's been taking shape over the last several years in and around Glenwood and Ford Heights, along or near the banks of Deer Creek – a tributary of the nearby Thorn Creek – near the southeastern corner of the county. Turns out past was prologue, as for the second year in a row the District has expanded the site through the purchase of four separate parcels, one of which, coming in at 68.2 acres was first acquired the previous year by *The Conservation Fund* as part of a larger project that I haven't yet discussed in these pages but promise I soon will. Taking in a combined 212.3 acres, each of the new properties is presently in agricultural production, with the land now prepped for restoration. As I wrote last year, this growing preserve is one to watch.



Big things may come from humble beginnings. (*Google Street View*)

9) Located in the middle of Chicago's south side, Beaubien Woods is an unexpected natural refuge in what by *any* definition is a densely developed locale. The preserve mixes woodland with a little bit of prairie and wetland – all surrounding a former strip mine that was repurposed into a shallow lake. Apropos of nothing, it's the woodland that got a bit of a leg up last year, with the donation of 7.6 forested acres from the Chicago Transit Authority. The land in question was a "CTA Redline Mitigation Property" – now you can interpret the meaning of that however you wish, but I choose to read it as the CTA's mitigating that awkward conversation I had on the Red Line at 1:00am a while back with a gentleman who appeared to be in the midst of exploring the pharmacological bounty of the planet's floral diversity. Apology accepted, CTA. Apology accepted.



## ✿ Forest Preserves of Winnebago County

10) The Indian Hill Forest Preserve is not a large place, but nor does it have to be. Largely situated on a rise at the confluence of the Kishwaukee River and the Rock, visitors to this wooded enclave can enjoy mature oaks and white pine along a winding trail in the upland before looking down upon a floodplain forest along the banks of the aforementioned Rock River. Both hill and river feature in a 6-acre addition to the now 55.3-acre site, home to more of those same oaks alongside a vibrant wet forest stretching along the river's bank. As a bonus, the larger area surrounding the confluence of these two major waterways is an archaeological hotspot, such that the land's elevated location may well have its own human story to tell.



## ✿ Forest Preserve District of DuPage County

11) Salt Creek Marsh wends along the border between the villages of Itasca and Wood Dale, following the river from which it draws its name. This 153.3-acre preserve is split into over a half dozen blocks, the largest of which has since 2016 when a neighboring landowner graciously donated land to expand the preserve featured an isolated, 1.4 acre oddly shaped bit of privately-owned property jutting up into its middle. How did this series of three distinct parcels come to be? Beats me, but apparently I wasn't alone in wondering what possible use they might be put to by a private party, because the previous owners decided this was not land worth paying property taxes on year after year to retain. Given it's surrounded by the preserve on three sides though, the Forest Preserve District *did* have use for it, and purchased those unpaid taxes, eventually leading to its acquisition. And that's all I've got for this one. Moving on!



12) We've got another small but worthwhile addition here, in the form of a single acre near the northernmost tip of the over 1,380-acre jewel of the FPDDC; the Blackwell preserve. Purchased for well north of \$1M, you'd be perfectly justified in asking *why?* What's so important about a thin stretch of partially forested land, most of which is in the floodplain owing to its near adjacency to a branch of the DuPage River? The answer lies immediately to the south, in the form of an extensive trail system that already runs through most of the preserve. That system will eventually be extended to the north to link up with the adjacent West DuPage Woods site in a project first discussed in the 2022 edition of this weighty tome, with the latest parcel being an essential (and dry) link between the two.



13) At first glance, this 5.4-acre mix of woodland and agricultural fields (surrounding a decent number of buildings) in Naperville might look to be geographically distinct from the McDowell Grove preserve of which it's now a part, but that's something of an illusion, as the adjacent parcel is owned by the County, containing as it does the Fawell Dam. In addition to regulating the flow of the West Branch of the DuPage River, this 1930s limestone product of the Civilian Conservation Corps also serves as part of a regional bikeway connecting the District land to the north and south, making the new parcel part of a single integrated whole.



### ✿ Forest Preserve District of Kane County

14) Sleepy Hollow Ravine is one of those sites which categorically disproves the notion that size is all that matters. Found in the northeastern part of the county right outside the village from which it takes its name, the ravine is a high-quality natural oasis. You don't need to take my uneducated word for it though. As the Forest Preserve District notes on their webpage for the preserve – which I have shamelessly appropriated respectfully borrowed – the incomparable botanist Dick Young wrote of the site that “*Few woodlands reflect the primitive order found in this ravine. The north face of the ravine slope epitomizes fine, mesic forest grading into a rich creek bottom which originates from a peaty, wooded seep.*”



Most of the ravine itself is a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve in private ownership, with the District owning much of the rest. Also in public ownership is a steeply wooded hillside overlooking the narrow gorge. Simply getting to this land to care for the slope is what one might generously call a challenge. Doing so with equipment? Wasn't going to happen. That all changed with a simple 0.59-acre parcel. Providing ready access off of a public road, the addition is a boon for the management of this small but invaluable site.



Aforesaid steeply wooded hillside. (Forest Preserve District of Kane County)

15) The Forest Preserve system – to some renown – is home to a panoply of features and critters. Forests and grasslands, streams and wetlands, animals of all shapes and sizes. The Freeman Kame-Meagher Forest Preserve however has something in abundance that is so rare, so precious, that it makes native prairie seem positively common by compare – *topography*. In Chicagoland! I know; it boggles the mind, right?



This shocking state of affairs comes courtesy of the same glaciers that flattened most of the state into something



Freeman-Kame in the depths of winter. (FPDKC)

approaching the consistency of a pancake. As the last glacier retreated around 9,000 B.C.E., it offloaded sediment, sand, gravel, and whatever else had been picked up over the millennia, with the namesake kames being formed by meltwater depositing the material into what would eventually become small hills, and related but distinct drumlins (a more elongated rise) shaped by the ice itself.

As will not surprise you, such a varied landscape gave rise to that same diversity of vegetative communities that so characterizes the FPDKC's preserves as a whole, only in this case all in one place – at what, with the purchase of 82.9 acres has now become the largest Forest Preserve in the District. The new property features those aforementioned glacial remnants throughout much of the site, with elevated forest interspersed with depressional ponds and wetlands, while more level land in the far south is in agricultural production. It's a fine addition to what by any definition is one of the finest Forest Preserves in the County.



What, you thought I was lying about the whole forest and wetland thing? (FPDKC)

## ✿ Forest Preserve District of Will County

16) There've been metric tons of ink and gigabytes of pixels in this business devoted to singing the praises of two things: geographic scale and interorganizational collaboration – usually when it comes time to write a grant application.

While for many those ideals are rather more valued in the abstract than on the ground, the good folks at the Forest Preserve District of Will County walk the talk, and they always have. Case in point, 239.6 acres of forest, stream, lake and field outside the City of Wilmington. Is it adjacent to any existing Forest Preserve properties? Nope! What makes this great is that it *is* adjacent to the Illinois DNR's Wilmington Shrub Prairie State Natural Area, which in turn adjoins multiple District sites. [The property](#) lies between several populations of the ornate box turtle, and following restoration will itself be prime habitat for the state threatened amphibian, while the isolated interior offers habitat for bobcats and badgers that require such spaces.



Ornate box turtle on the move. (PublicDomainPictures.net)

Taken together, we're looking at over 2,000 acres of extremely high-quality natural habitat, as evidenced by the fact that almost all of it has over the decades been added to the Illinois Nature Preserves system. The Forest Preserve folks know what they're doing, and they're darned good at it too.

17) The Hickory Creek Preserve is the FPDWC's biggest property, which is saying something. It's *so* large, it borders three separate municipalities in the form of the cities of Mokena, Frankfort, and New Lenox. At over 1,500 acres, you will not be shocked to learn that the mostly wooded site also incorporates prairie and wetland alongside its eponymous waterway, which flows over five miles through the preserve. Somewhat surprisingly, at least to me, a small, 1.2-acre addition takes in almost all of those varied features. Woodland and wetland sit astride the banks of a tributary to the namesake creek, while the parcel itself squares off the preserve, which as you can likely guess rather facilitates more effective management of the greater whole.



18) We're changing scale a wee bit with this next one. While Goodenow Grove, on the far eastern side of the county, was already an impressively large preserve when the year began, it was soon to get quite the sizable upgrade – at 488.9 (net) acres, this mix of forest, wetland, open water and agricultural field has the distinction of being the single largest land protection project of 2025 in the state. The size is eye opening, but it's what that land contains that really excites. At least one E&T species calls the site home, which will not be a surprise when you learn that much of the original preserve has long been dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. And this new property *is* very much an addition to and part of a greater whole. You'd be forgiven for questioning me on that; isn't there a rather prominent highway between the two? Yes there is, but you know what also sits between them? A tunnel! Harkening back to the days when a railroad traversed the land, this connecting sinew has long provided safe transit for wildlife, and will in the future offer human visitors the same service. This is just a great project however you look at it.



A small piece of a much, much larger whole. (*Google Street View*)

19) The District closed out the year by looking to the future, specifically the future of the DuPage River Trail, a very much in development project that will, if the stars align, eventually run for forty miles largely along the shores of its namesake river. This being the case, the addition of 40.1 riverine acres to the appropriately named Riverview Farmstead Preserve on the western edge of the Village of Plainfield is fortuitous indeed. As with the new addition, much of the now just over 400-acre property is in agricultural production, which will eventually be restored to native vegetation. Just as importantly, the expanded site is now ideally positioned to itself host an extension of that aforementioned trail, which already snakes through the northern portion of the preserve.



## ✿ Illinois Department of Natural Resources

We return now to the overachievers of the conservation world. In the last few reports, I've more than once recommended setting [Yakety Sax](#) to a loop while reading about the Department's many, many, *many* projects, as it's more than a bit appropriate. This time out, let's try something equally absurd, but *classy*. Which will finish first – your perusal of this section, or Beethoven's entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony?

20) Back in the 2019 edition of this report, Pere Marquette State Park had the distinction of being home to the largest public sector land acquisition of the year in the form of over 440 acres of wooded, rolling terrain along its eastern extent. This was followed up two years later by a small addition of just over 10 acres – again mostly wooded, but also featuring a driveway. Why the callbacks? Because taken together, the two created a 4-acre inholding (accessed by that aforementioned drive) that the owner expressed immediate interest in selling to the DNR. The Department – being as much a fan of inholdings as I am of modern art – thought this a fine idea. The project finally came to fruition last year, with the result being that the inholding is no more. If only there were a similarly elegant solution to my problem with modern art...



21-22) The DNR never ceases to impress in these reports, and coincidentally we now turn to one of the Department's most impressive sites – Cahokia Mounds. Located just outside St. Louis, the State Historic Site encompasses much of an ancient city (whose real name we don't actually know) that as returning readers will recall, was *the* major center of the [Mississippian culture](#), reaching its peak in the mid-12th century and abandoned by the middle of the 14th.

Additions to this invaluable cultural treasure are generally measured in single acres, such that – as a history aficionado – I was as surprised as I was thrilled to see it grow by a

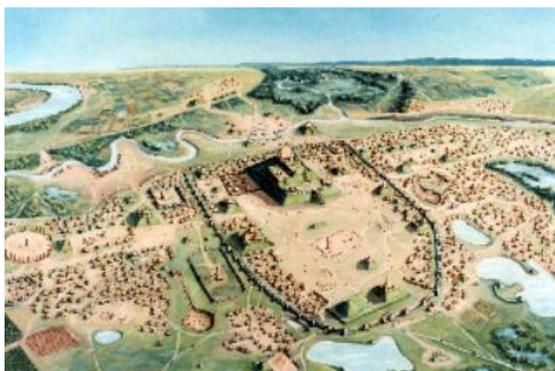


whopping 78.7 acres with the acquisition of an agricultural field on the southwest corner of the site. Expert analysis has determined that there are likely cultural artifacts lying beneath the earth, and apart from that, it by and large squares off the property's boundary. (Photo credit: IDNR)

...and we're not done yet. Because last year *also* featured the further development of a new satellite of the larger site, located to the south of the main city about midway between St. Louis and Belleville. I say "further development" and not "creation" because the first piece closed not in 2025 but in the final months of 2024 and the new person working on the project *wasn't aware they were supposed to tell me about it*. I know, right? I too am filled with righteous indignation that they didn't know that some random guy whom they've never heard of writes an annual report that they've also never heard of.



Anyhow, this is one of those projects where the word "gratitude" seems deeply insufficient. The former owner outright donated 15.3 acres of this wooded property to the Department in that initial 2024 transaction, which archaeological records indicate was utilized in the latter years of Cahokia's habitation. That was followed last year by sale to the DNR of an adjacent 5.3 acres that are similarly wooded, alongside a residence. It's a great project, and one, IMO, that all involved can take a lot of pride in.



Cahokia as it once was. (IDNR)

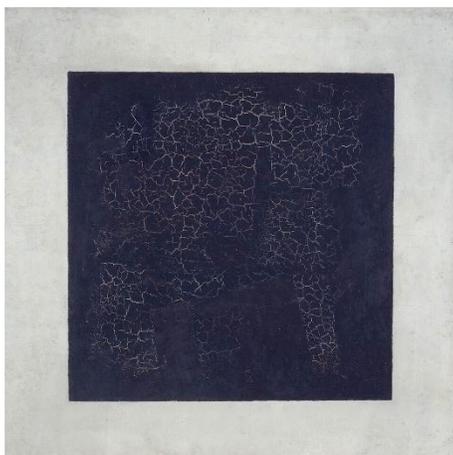
23) Well, this is an unusual one. Land transfers, while not unheard of in these pages, aren't exactly commonplace either. Frank Holten State Park, at a bit over 1,100 acres, is a pretty substantial natural oasis surrounded by the city of East St. Louis – as it happens just under three miles to the south from the subject of our previous site at Cahokia. The park sits next door to a car auction business that found it would have use for 5.51 acres (outlined in red on the map to your right) of marginal land owned by the state along the border between the two. That was a nice coincidence, because the DNR found that *it* would have use for 12.17 acres of not at all marginal land a short distance to the south owned by that selfsame business (outlined in yellow on said map). What'd the Department get in this deal? Some prime wetland habitat sandwiched by land owned by the local sanitary district, all of which is frequented by a variety of waterfowl that find wetlands and open water to be a fair bit more inviting than a slender strip of disturbed woods adjacent to several thousand cars regularly trundling in and out. I'd call that a win.



24) The Spring Lake Fish & Wildlife Area in Tazewell County was the recipient last year of a 0.8-acre addition along the bank of the lake's northern finger, and this fact confused me to no end. I mean, the parcel itself is straightforward, hosting a dirt road that can provide public access to the state land. But though I'd been given a map of the place, I *could not find it* to save my life. Looked to the left, looked to the right. Looked up, looked down. Nothing. It turns out that, county parcel data notwithstanding, most all of the eponymous lake is in fact part of the publicly owned site. So far as I knew, the state property was limited to the adjacent terrestrial land, which became an issue here since the lake is huge, such that the new addition was a good two miles away from anything I'd identified as part of the SFWA. Now, here's the thing. I-View has been around for almost a decade, and the Spring Lake FWA mapped as being a wholly land-based site the whole time, albeit one providing ready access to its namesake. Plenty of people must've seen this thing. Why did no one *tell me*? I feel like Benedict Cumberbatch upon learning the [correct pronunciation](#) of the word "penguin." Plenty of people knew, no one spoke up. I hear you, Mr. Cumberbatch. I hear you.



25) We've got another win in the battle against inholdings (sadly, there's been no commensurate progress in my aforementioned and equally important battle against modern art), this time at the Harry "Babe" Woodyard State Natural Area near the Indiana state line in Vermilion County. The county's namesake river parallels the 9.6-acre property's northern and eastern borders, and a smaller offshoot of the same bisects the land.



I ask you, *what* am I supposed to see in this? (*Wikimedia Commons*)

Between these watery channels grows a dense forest, surrounded by more dense forest – all of which is a registered Land & Water Reserve. That being the case, this is one of those sites you might think the DNR would've pursued years ago, and you'd be right, as they and the owners originally discussed sale of the property back in the '90s. A title issue prevented the two parties from finalizing a sale at the time, but diligent sleuthing in recent years uncovered the missing documentation, and the deal was done.



26) On the subject of forest and water, I bring you forest...and a whole lot of water. The map at right makes it *look* like this 45.5-acre parcel is squaring off a preserve, bordered as it is on three sides by an existing site, such that you're probably expecting me to go on about the wonders of adding depth to a property or simplifying its management. Beware though, for the power of the visual can be used to nefarious ends. What you see before you is [not owned by the Illinois DNR](#), but rather is part of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge!



So, why the interest from the DNR then, which has incorporated this into the nearby Cache River State Natural Area? Well, the clue is in the name. The Cache River flows through the property, which hosts two water control structures that regulate flow into the Lower Cache River and thence into the big bald cypress and tupelo swamps that so characterize the region. A local drainage district has endeavored for decades via litigation to get those structures removed – not knocking them; their mission is in the name – such that moving this land into public ownership goes a good way towards ensuring the vitality of those emblematic swamp communities.

27) While we're on the subject of the Cache, like any good river, this one is fed by a plethora of smaller waterways, among them the very channelized Dutchman Creek as well as the shorter and very not channelized Cave Creek. Both feature in the second addition to the SNA last year, eleven miles east of the first (yes, fellow northern Illinois residents. Preserves in the southern half of our good state can be *big*). This 27.38-acre tract was originally part of a larger property mostly used for agricultural production. Cave Creek separates the wooded north of that property from the agricultural south though – a north which is further bisected by Dutchman Creek – leading all involved to conclude that



the land would be better served as part of the State Natural Area. Hosting a diverse hardwood community including but most assuredly not limited to cypress, birch, elm, hickory, chestnut, and multiple species of maple in a wet and wet-mesic floodplain forest, I'll not argue with that assessment.

The Cache River State Natural Area in all its glory.  
(Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

28) I typically need to spend at least a bit of time in each of these descriptions explaining the ecological virtues of the property in question; providing some context so that you, my dear readers, know why the land was worth preserving, and what you might find if you choose to visit. ... I do not have to do that with the Elton E. Fawks Bald Eagle Refuge State Natural Area.

This 36.52-acre addition to what was already over 220 acres of forest is part of a larger parcel that came up for auction in 2024. Time constraints being what they were, the property was purchased by a private party, but one who fortunately



*Kristie DeBrun – IDNR*

was willing to entertain an offer from the Department for a portion of the site. The purchase serves dual purposes, both preserving additional canopy for roosting birds and providing safer access to the southern reaches of the SNA. On top of that, the entire parcel – not surprisingly – is part of the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory; this one works on so very many levels.



29) Turns out past was prologue at Ward's Grove State Natural Area. Last year I waxed on about the unbroken canopy and mature understory of this mesic and dry-mesic forest, which is probably why the property has long been a dedicated Illinois Nature Preserve. As most of my readers can attest, the only thing better than a large unbroken forest is a *larger* unbroken forest. And that's exactly what we have in the form of a 19.8-acre addition off of the north side of the SNA. Part of the same Illinois Natural Areas Inventory site as the existing preserve, the elevated property eschews the plain old mesic part of the equation, instead featuring an entirely dry-mesic forest community that hides a machine shed which'll be used to house equipment, while the forest itself provides housing for migratory birds stopping in to see what all the fuss is about.



Machine shed! I mean, um, isn't that forest nice?  
(*Kristie DeBrun – IDNR*)

30) Speaking of unexpected encores, to my profound surprise, we're back at Volo Bog after most recently discussing this most fascinating of sites only last year. As I noted at the time, this unusual State Natural Area – an open water quaking bog – is so special that The Nature Conservancy quite literally got its start in the land protection business by purchasing the core of the preserve in the late 1950s.



This 54.1-acre addition is *not* a bog. It's not even a wetland. At present, it's a farm field. And I couldn't be happier. This is, in fact, my favorite DNR land acquisition of the year. I mean, look, I *really* love Volo Bog; have since I first visited the place as part of a summer job in High School. It's just so cool. OK, so here's why this one's important. The addition not only enables the Department to improve the SNA's water quality since, yeah, as you probably surmised the ag field is on a rise overlooking the adjacent wetland, but more to the point it keeps things from getting significantly *worse*. Flat, dry land at the intersection of two major roads. In the Chicago metropolitan area. This is prime developable land folks, as evidenced by the fact that a bunch of condos are quite literally in the middle of being built across the street. That's never going to happen here though, and I for one think this outstanding.



I told you it was close to the bog. (Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

*Good news. We're halfway through. Have you hit the third movement yet? Moving right along then.*

31-32) The Fox Creek State Fish & Wildlife Area on the border of Edwards and Wayne counties was host to two additions last year; one of 98.9 acres and the other of 0.33, both from the same family – a family that – and I promise you this going to become relevant in a bit – also sold the land that became the original SFWA back in 2021. I was *immensely* bemused by the circumstances leading to the latter, but I suppose the former, being demonstrably high-quality habitat deserves its moment in the sun as well.

Geographically distinct from the existing preserve, that larger parcel is nonetheless both hydrologically and



ecologically unified with the main body of the site. A combination of wetland and wet forest roll off of the Fox River as it bisects the land on its way to the Little Wabash River ~1.5 miles to the south. That mix of vegetative communities offers habitat to a variety of wetland dependent species – both aerial and terrestrial. And that’s not just a hypothetical as is so often the case with these things. No, the property hosts established populations of at least three threatened and endangered species of fauna, so that’s awesome. No, seriously. We’re a lot pages into this thing such that if you’ve been reading from the top you’re probably starting to zone out a bit, but think about it. A property with a single threatened or endangered species is one that’s going to attract the attention of quite literally anyone who works in this space; land managers and funders, organizational leaders and elected representatives. One with *at least* three? That’s a profound opportunity.



New addition to Fox Creek SFWA. (Kristie DeBrun – IDNR)

OK, now for that itty bity third of an acre. Situated at a point where a public road running east to west takes a 90 degree turn to run up north, back when the Department purchased the original preserve, it declined to take ownership of this small area, on account of it contains two old grain bins that I assume would’ve been a liability or at least a burden. But you know what else it has on account of that road? Exceptional access to the preserve itself. Oops. Site staff observed that it really would facilitate their work if they could, ya know, access the site, and the family graciously offered to donate the parcel. The whole episode brings a smile to my face, but largely because it ended well for one and all.

33-34) As longtime readers (and anyone who just read the Private Sector section of this report) will recall, the twin Prairie Ridge State Natural Areas in Jasper and Marion counties are the centerpiece of a multi-decade effort to return the Greater Prairie Chicken to the Prairie State. Starting with around 10,000,000 in 1860 when I presume someone first thought to estimate the population – which means there were likely a good deal more a few decades prior – by 1994, a few zeros had been shaved off of that number. Six of them, to be precise. Yes, what was a banner year for both originality and variety in Hollywood with the release of *Forrest Gump*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Lion King*, *Little Women*, *Clerks*, *Speed*, and *The Shawshank Redemption* (I know, right? Moviegoers sure had it good back then. What’ve we got in comparison today? The 57<sup>th</sup> Marvel film?) was significantly less uplifting for Illinois’ once iconic bird, whose population had dwindled to 40 inbred individuals who made the Habsburgs look positively healthy in comparison.



The bird's fortunes have waxed and waned since then, with one of the consistent needs being contiguous, healthy prairie habitat. And that's just what three additions last year spread across these two sites have provided. All are but the latest manifestations of an ongoing partnership that's been running in full force *at least* since those modern classics graced the nation's cinemas; that between the DNR and the Illinois Audubon Society, the latter of whom has acquired and deeded to the state multiple parcels at both sites over the decades. The first of the new parcels is the 39.3-acre Graber Grassland on the northern end of the Jasper County site. Bordering the state land on two sides, the property is a well-established prairie reconstruction, already providing that essential combination of habitat and scale. The second is well on its way to being a restored grassland as well; 76.5 acres on the *southern* end of said Jasper County site. First discussed in the 2022 edition of this report, the addition is surrounded by the existing SNA on three sides. Taken together or individually, these are welcome and dare I say essential additions to one of the Department's most ecologically vital sites.



Prairie chicken at the State Natural Area  
(GregTheBusker - Wikimedia Commons)

35) The last parcel – at the rather more geographically disbursed Marion County site – is the aptly named Joy Prairie, featured in these pages last year. Given the contiguous space required, the prairie chickens are better served by the Jasper County property. Here, the focus is more on local flora, which itself benefits quite a bit from scale. That's doubly relevant when it comes to the native grasslands that are in such short supply across our



fair state. This is a fact of which IAS is acutely aware, leading to their [purchase and restoration](#) in the early 2010s of what is now the Loy Prairie Land & Water Reserve, which borders Joy Prairie. As I wrote at the time, when the SNA's manager learned that the adjacent 106.75-acre property was going to be sold at auction, the DNR turned to Illinois Audubon, which was able to quickly bid on the land (the photo at left is IAS office manager Miss Margery monitoring the bid process), holding it until the Department could arrange financing to acquire the site. Arrange financing they did, and this former agricultural field now seeded to a mix of native grasses, wildflowers, and forbs has become part of an expanding

grassland preserve providing refuge to plant and animal alike. (Photo credit: IAS)



36) Continuing on the theme of how awesome is the partnership between the Illinois DNR and the Illinois Audubon Society, a couple years back I had the distinct pleasure of discussing the acquisition of the 43.7-acre Alfred & Joanna Anesi Wildlife Sanctuary by the Society. How do you know it was a pleasure? Because my description of the place was about two pages long. As I wrote at the time, IAS stepped in at the request of the DNR, which had been notified that the land was going to be sold at auction in less than a month. That kind of turnaround is a tad quicker than the state can operate at, but the good folks at Audubon – to the surprise of none who know them – were up to the challenge, securing the land and holding it until the Department could arrange financing to bring this legit invaluable preserve into public ownership, which has now been done.



So, why am I so effusive about such a relatively small site? Well, I'll quote myself from the 2023 annual report, with only slight tweaks:

Back in 2013, 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 51<sup>st</sup> 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.

A deceptively mundane surface. (*Kristie DeBrun - IDNR*)

That recharge area is why Clifftop's work was so important, and why this 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.

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 Clifftop's earlier acquisition promises to improve it, as agricultural fields are transitioned to forest and prairie. *(Photo credit: IAS)*



37) Four years ago I regaled you with the breathtaking news that the State Historic Site centered on the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Dana-Thomas House in downtown Springfield had expanded with the purchase of a nearby building *and* almost half of a parking lot. I hesitate to even write this next bit, knowing that it will lead many to swoon from the sheer shock and mind-boggling implications, but I long ago committed to annually reporting each and every



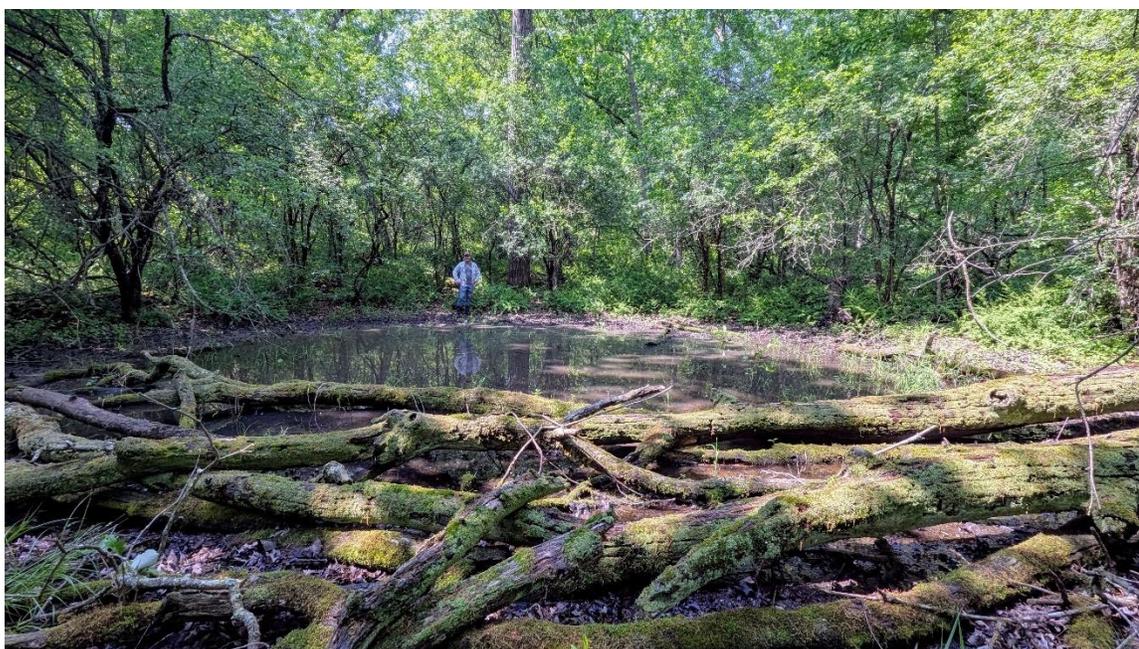
The Dana-Thomas House  
(Teemu008 – Wikimedia Commons)

land conservation project across our good state.

And so, it is with the heavy burden of that responsibility weighing upon my brow that I say unto you, yay, verily, the rest of that parking lot has been purchased. Along with a smaller parking lot across Cook Street to the north, in a 0.83-acre acquisition that will forever be remembered as *the* defining event of 2025.



38) As you might reasonably expect, a 205-acre addition to Chain O' Lakes State Park includes part of a lake – Lake Marie, to be precise. It also takes in a whole lot of cattail marsh. But it's what those cattails surround that made my sit up and take notice of this generous donation in the northwestern corner of Lake County. What might that be you may ask? All but two acres of a ~32-acre tree-filled island. This isolated dry-mesic forest is home to large, mature bur, white, and red oaks, complemented by numerous shagbark hickories. It's a true oak-hickory forest, and for all I know might well be a pre-settlement remnant of the same. It will surprise no one to learn that the island will eventually be registered with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission as a Land & Water Reserve.



Vernal pool amid the forest. (*Kristie DeBrun - IDNR*)

39) You've no doubt noticed that most of the properties acquired by the Illinois DNR over the last twelve months have some intricacy or nuance that can't be wholly conveyed in a simple photo or map... That is *not* the case with our esteemed state agency's penultimate project of the year. What we have here is a good old-fashioned inholding, bordered on three sides by the Rice Lake State Fish & Wildlife Refuge and on the fourth by US 24 about twenty miles southwest of Peoria. This 15.36-acre parcel of bottomland forest squares off the Refuge's boundary, not only eliminating the otherwise omnipresent threat of trespass from those hunting on the state land, but making management in general a good deal easier. Profound? No, but undeniably valuable.



40) Remember up above when discussing The Nature Conservancy's recent endeavors I said we'd be getting back to the Dickson Mounds State Museum? Let no one say I don't follow through, because we close our exploration of the Department's work this past year with exactly that. What is today a valued archeological site was established sometime around 800, and subsequently used for over 450 years (and was largely temporally coterminous with the city of Cahokia, discussed above). That's a long time, as evidenced by the profound social changes the site recorded, from a hunter gatherer society to an agrarian one, while the settlement itself evolved from a place of burial to a thriving community.

A 30.3-acre addition connects the main body of the museum property with a smaller unit to the south, expanding protection of an invaluable cultural treasure – and if that isn't a good way to close out the Department's work for the year, I do not know what is.

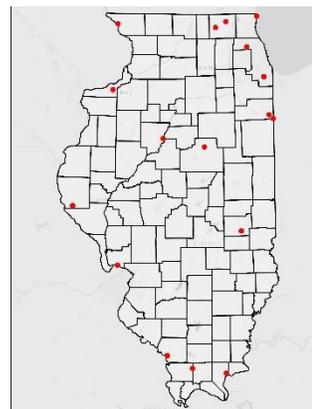


Dickson Mounds (IDNR)

### ✿ Illinois Nature Preserves Commission

At risk of stating the obvious, the impact of the Illinois Nature Preserves system is matched only by its import. The legislation by which it was created established – for the first time – that conservation could be the highest and best use for a property, and that this protection could be given the force of law. It also arguably paved the way for the establishment of conservation easements, which weren't legislatively created by the state until over a decade following the creation of the Nature Preserves Commission.

Over the course of 2025, eighteen sites totaling 1,731.5 acres were established or expanded across the state. This was largely concentrated in Nature Preserve dedications, a dozen of which added just over three quarters of the newly protected acreage, with half a dozen Land & Water Reserves encompassing the remainder.



To repeat what I wrote last year because if it's not broke there's no need to rhetorically fix it, the public and nonprofit sectors are always major contributors when it comes to newly dedicated or registered sites, but they're not alone, joined each year by institutions and private individuals across the state who own and steward a panoply of forests and prairies, streams and wetlands. High quality ecological jewels that they have in many cases cared for over the course of decades, and which are now forever protected. Let's take a look at those, shall we?

41-43) You might think that Adams County – about 80 miles due west of Springfield – is a flat expanse of corn and soybeans rolling past the horizon. You would be wrong. Oh, rest assured it has plenty of agricultural fields – and some of the most productive soil in the country – but this homage to the nation's sixth (no, not the second) president is cut through with wooded rivers and streams emptying into the nearby Mississippi River that marks its western border. It's on one of those streams – a tributary to Pigeon Creek – that, in 2019, a dedicated landowner established both a small Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve to protect the habitat of two bats species both on the federal T&E list (one endangered, the other threatened). That act of generosity was built upon last year, as various members of the family registered and dedicated an additional 31.5 acres, both expanding and physically connecting the two sites.



Mushrooms in a forest. (*The Conservation Foundation*)

44) Sticking with the rocky uplands overlooking the Mississippi but moving south, we return to Jackson County with a follow-up from last year's report. As you might recall, I explained that a Land & Water Reserve registered at the time was the first of a two-part project, to be followed the next year by an adjacent Nature Preserve. Well, next year is here; huzzah! The new preserve is home to *five* listed species – both plant and animal – three of which are endangered. If you're still not impressed, the property also hosts 19 avian Species in Greatest Need of Conservation which use the site for breeding. That faunal diversity is possible in large part because the site takes in an eye-opening array of natural communities, ranging from cliff to stream, glade, to woodland, to prairie, and everything in between. And that on a mere 11.7 acres.

45) Let us continue our journey south, this time to Pope County and very nearly to the Ohio River for a project near and dear to my heart. Is that because of the land's floral and faunal diversity? Its striking vistas? *No!* It's because crafting the legal description for this dedication of 85.3 acres – as it happens another addition to an existing Nature Preserve – ended up being a months-long cartographical ~~nightmare~~ journey that I will long remember...but the land is pretty nice too. How nice? Well, much of the property is retired fields in varying stages of succession, but 18 acres are Grade A and B dry-woodland and dry-mesic woodland (aka the *really really* high quality stuff) that in turn buffers and expands upon the original dedicated site, all of which is adjacent to and complemented by the Shawnee National Forest.

46) So far as I know, there are no superlatives in the English language too grand for Gensburg-Markham Prairie. Incongruously located in the dense inner suburbs of Chicago, this 180-acre grassland was never put to the plough, and never developed. It sat, undisturbed, until 1971, when the owner of what became the core of the future prairie donated the land to Northeastern Illinois University, staff from which immediately began an intense restoration program. Those endeavors – later joined by The Nature Conservancy which today owns additional land that is part of the larger site – paid off in spades, with the remnant grassland one of the highest quality tallgrass prairies in the state. Portions of the site were first dedicated in 1980 in a process that continued over the next 45 years. In 2025, the final undedicated pieces of this unparalleled natural treasure were added to the INPC system – largely former roadway rights-of-way that were vacated in the 2010s – including 11.01 acres under the University's committed stewardship.



Gensburg-Markham Prairie (*Allan Scott Walker*)

47) We close our look at the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission with a project I touched on up in the Private Sector section of this report; one brought to fruition by a partnership between the INPC, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, and some quite frankly awesome landowners that saw an ecological and agricultural jewel in the village of Wonder Lake forever preserved by a combination of conservation easement and Nature Preserve dedication. Check it out if you've not done so, because now we arrive at the second part of the tale. As I noted earlier, the original Nature Preserve – Barber Fen – was dedicated over thirty years ago (and which, as an aside, was added to in the early 2010s by the McHenry County Conservation District, which owns adjacent land). A 29.4-acre addition completes this work, taking in high quality sedge meadow and the rest of the graminoid fen which, in what became a recurring theme this year, is home to not one but two state endangered plants.

## ✿ Lake County Forest Preserve District

48) The Barrington area is home to two stellar 501(c)(3) land trusts, both of which have featured in these pages over the years; Citizens for Conservation and Barrington Area Conservation Trust. The two now share something aside from the communities they serve; both have played important roles in making the Cuba Marsh Forest Preserve what it is today.



Now one of the state's most storied land trusts, CFC got its start over half a century ago with the simple mission of protecting and stewarding the community's natural resources. It was in furtherance of this goal that they helped the Forest Preserve District establish Cuba Marsh – a mix of dry-mesic prairie and savanna, sedge meadow, and freshwater marsh – as the greater Barrington area's first forest preserve in the mid '70s.

Fast forward a few decades, and BACT stepped up to help grow the same site – now a registered Illinois Land & Water Reserve – by turning what had been a future conservation easement into a future addition to the preserve itself. The then owner of the 9.4-acre parcel is a dedicated conservationist who had purchased the land several years earlier, working with BACT to restore the property with the intention of eventually placing it into a conservation easement. When last year she expressed interest in selling the land to a conservation buyer or gifting it to the land trust, BACT instead connected her to the Forest Preserve District, which immediately saw the value of incorporating the property – which borders Cuba Marsh on two sides – into the larger preserve. One thing about that agreement that brought a smile to my face were the terms; the District is obliged to apply for registration of the property as a Land & Water Reserve (so, any INPC folks reading this report, now you know that's in your near-term future) and, for good measure, includes a deed restriction requiring them to treat the parcel as though it were so registered from the moment they took ownership. That is the mark of someone covering all of their conservation bases, and I love it.



Cuba Marsh Forest Preserve © Justine Neslund, courtesy of the Lake County Forest Preserves

49) I was texting with an acquaintance fall before last about the at that time upcoming Forest Preserve referendum (because why speak or heaven forbid chat in person when you can instead exchange passably transcribed written messages? What do you think we are, animals?), and found my mind turning to Waukegan – a heavily developed community in the northeastern part of the county with a paucity of Forest Preserve sites. This was something of a downer, because while a major population center, I figured the good residents of the county seat wouldn't have an opportunity to benefit from renewed growth of the District to the same degree as would many other county residents, most especially including myself. When they've already [paved paradise](#) and put up a parking lot\*, there's not a whole lot you can do, right?



Well, yes, but the thing is I lacked both the vision and attention to detail of the professionals. I do not consider this to be a bad thing, because it meant I was happily surprised to subsequently learn that the Greenbelt Forest Preserve grew by 13.2 mostly wooded acres with an addition off of the northeast side of the now 592-acre natural expanse. Apparently the property had been on the District's wish list since the late '80s, and

that may well be because it's across the street from a County facility that in turn adjoins a local municipal park – both of which host a network of interconnected trails. *(Photo credit and copyright: Lake County Forest Preserves)*

Now, Greenbelt is no slouch itself in the trail department, but all are located well to the south of the new neighbors. That's about to change, as the preserve implements a new master plan courtesy of that since passed referendum, which will connect the previously isolated footpaths while continuing to restore and manage this green island in service to all of the community's many residents.

\* Yes, I know that's a cover of the Joni Mitchell original.



Flowers blooming (Cynthia Kanner)

50) Raven Glen Forest Preserve in and around the Village of Antioch offers visitors miles of trails through prairie, wetland and forest, ostensibly stretching from one end of this elongated site to the other except no, no they don't. Geographically distinct from the rest of the preserve, what was once known as Red Wing Marsh Forest Preserve has long been doing its own thing off to the west.



As its former name implies, this ~38-acre parcel is, well, a marsh. Across a public road from and hydrologically connected to Redwing Slough State Natural Area, I presume the land was acquired to protect that high quality refuge. Anyhow, the wetlands that cover pretty much everything on the site that isn't open water stretch down to the south, so if your goal *is* to manage the water flow into said refuge, it makes some sense to incorporate those into the larger preserve. Apparently the Powers That Be feel the same way, because that's exactly what they did with this 27.9-acre addition. In the west, the wetlands give way to higher, drier ground off of a nearby public roadway, so as an added bonus the property provides access to this western outpost that requires neither a) parking on the side of a major thoroughfare and hoping you don't get hit by a car nor b) trying to load or unload your equipment in several feet of standing water. I'd call that a victory for conservation, but that's just me.

51) It's only been a year, but we're already back at the Forest Preserve District's only Not a Forest Preserve... Preserve. The Lotus Country Conservation Preserve (with the replacement noun having been quickly settled upon in the narrow space of time between the signing of a purchase agreement and final closing) was established for the sole purpose of protecting the largest heron and egret rookery in the county. The wetland complex upon which that rookery lies was thereafter largely divided amongst four parcels; the



Lotus Country Conservation Preserve  
© R. Scott McNeill, courtesy of the  
Lake County Forest Preserves



Conservation Preserve, a local municipal park, a K-8 public school, and a private property. One of these things is not like the others. I am clearly not the only person to realize that, as the Lotus Country preserve was expanded last year with the acquisition of 34.4 acres of that private property consisting of wetland, woodland, and an agricultural field. This not only by and large protects the whole of the rookery, but adds an additional upland buffer to the same. Well done, folks. Well done.

52) It's rare that these pages don't feature an addition to Lakewood or its neighboring preserve of Ray Lake – which I suppose goes some way in explaining why this is the largest single block of protected terrestrial natural land in the county. That agglomeration has grown again with the addition of 54.47 agricultural acres to the Lakewood Forest Preserve. Located off of a major arterial road that divides the two sites, the property's most notable feature, from where I sit, isn't the annually alternating crop of corn and soybeans – though if that's your thing, hey, you be you – but its location. Surrounded on three sides by the existing preserve, it adds depth to this entire portion of the site, which will be made all the more valuable as the land is restored to a mix of forest and prairie.



53) I've been doing this for a while now, such that I usually have a decent sense as to why this or that property was deemed worthy of protection. But I was completely at a loss when it came to 2.5 acres off of the north side of Dutch Gap Forest Preserve on the Illinois/Wisconsin border. It's a farm field. Which, yes, the District has acquired plenty of farm fields for very good reasons, several of which are discussed in detail in this very report. But this one is simply the backend of a larger residential lot. It doesn't square off a boundary or close an inholding, or even provide depth to a larger restoration area. *And* the property was donated. What the heck was going on?



The key turned out to be that single tree in the middle of the field that you can see on the aerial photo. That tree has borne witness to more than the annual turnings of the plough. It has in fact watched over its patch of this great country since well before that country existed. This singular bur oak spread its first leaves ~280 years ago, at a time when most of the nation's founders were themselves but children. It was to protect this



irreplaceable piece of history (that might well be the oldest living thing in Lake County) that its owner took the initiative to donate the land over which it stands vigil to the Forest Preserve District, which will now restore the surrounding landscape to the oak savanna which gave it birth so very many years ago. *(Photo credit and copyright: Lake County Forest Preserves)*

54) Most who've been reading these reports for any length of time will recall that while quite wary whenever the term "land exchange" makes an appearance, it's an idea that I heartily support when it makes ecological sense. Fortunately for me, that's exactly what was featured in an agreement between the Forest Preserve and the Village of Gurnee last spring. And how. OK, stay with me here. First off, the District granted to the municipality a 0.2-acre parcel that's next to a trail corridor and as you can see on the map at right (if you squint real hard that is; it's that little pinprick that's shaded in red) has absolutely nothing else going for it. Because the village's next door public works facility was accidentally encroaching on the land while at the same time the parcel itself has no real ecological importance, deeding it to the village doesn't harm the mission of the Forest Preserve District *so long as they get better, compensatory land in return* while it *does* help the village in pursuit of its own mission.



So, what exactly *did* the Forest Preserve get in return? For starters, 1.4 acres of largely wooded land nearby that is adjacent and so a natural addition to the Lake Carina Forest Preserve. That alone would be enough for me to call this a win; getting 7x the land you gave up (admittedly from a very, very small base), with the new property actually *having* ecological value? Yeah, I'm good with that.

But that wasn't the whole deal. No, the District was *also* deeded a comparatively whopping 11.9 acres several miles to the south, at the other end of the preserve. Surrounded by said preserve on three sides and on the fourth by land owned by the local electric utility, this completely wooded parcel through which a small stream passes on its northern end is also completely undevelopable, owing in large part to something else it's adjacent to – the Des Plaines River. At the end of the day, each party gave up land that was useless to them but of substantial value to the other. This is a project that benefited everyone, and cost no one.

55) Over twenty years ago, a public-spirited local landowner agreed to grant the Forest Preserve District a trail easement over four acres in the western reaches of the county; a forward-thinking agreement that presaged what is today an increasingly extensive trail network traversing public and private lands alike. What few if any could've guessed at the time was that this humble trail was only the beginning. See, that easement is part of a much larger 143.6-acre expanse taking in open water wetlands and agricultural fields, dense woods and a meandering creek; even a few mature oaks. Two decades later, the property's by then new owner and the District agreed that it'd be a shame to lose all that, which is why every square inch is now part of the nearby Kestrel Ridge Forest Preserve – a preserve that didn't even exist back when that trail easement was put in place.



That, however, is not the end of this little tale. Because the landowner's dedication to the community went beyond simply selling the property for the benefit of the public, as they accepted a purchase price that was *significantly* below its fair market value, donating the balance of the land's appraised value to the people of Lake County.

56) Absent a formal termination and I presume some quite substantial legal bills, most conservation easements are perpetual; they'll last until the sun swallows the Earth or the U.S. constitutional system collapses in chaos. The same however can not be said of *other* easements, which became super relevant with the acquisition of this 9.3-acre addition to Half Day Forest Preserve in the Village of Lincolnshire. Most of this wet forest – 7.4 acres to be precise – was protected decades ago. Why? Because the District wanted to



Half Day Forest Preserve © Bob Callebert, courtesy of the Lake County Forest Preserves

build the county-spanning Des Plaines River

Trail, and the only practical way to get that trail from north to south was through this one parcel. Most of the remainder was an open pond, such that last year apparently all involved realized that it made more sense for the public agency to just straight up acquire the whole property, and so it was done. This likely matters little to most, but it enabled *me* to simplify my mapping data by getting rid of those pesky easements, and I think we can all agree that that's the important thing here.



57) We close our time in Lake County this year by turning to the village of Winthrop Harbor, near the Wisconsin border. This heavily urbanized landscape has something I did not expect – 119.9-acres of agricultural fields alongside scattered wetlands. Which is telling of my preconceptions, because I mapped out that entire area not a year prior to penning this piece, yet had completely forgotten the property existed. To be honest, there's not much more to say about this one right now. Prior to Euro-American settlement, the land was part of a small prairie surrounded by oak savanna; located at that transitional point where the grasslands of the Midwest gave way to the great forests of the north. Will the District restore the land to those open fields of yesteryear? I don't know, but whatever they decide upon, it's without question going to be of benefit for the entire community.



## ✿ McHenry County Conservation District

58) While many if not most were gently easing back into work on their first day in the office (or at least starring blankly at a laptop) following New Year festivities, the good folks at the MCCD were closing on a wee 0.3-acre addition to the now 319.8-acre Hickory Grove preserve on the far east side of the county. There's not much to this one to be honest; the 30 ft. wide linear parcel runs along the edge of a public road, and was acquired from the County government via purchase of the back taxes after the previous owner presumably observed that there wasn't a whole lot they could do with the land apart from building a rockin' bocce ball court. Let this be a reminder though; the tax sale is the conservationist's friend.



59) Five years back, I discussed a generous gift from a private individual who donated the funds for the Conservation District's private arm – the McHenry County Conservation Foundation – to acquire a 14.7-acre property surrounded on three sides by the Margeno Ridge Conservation Area. As I wrote at the time describing the land *“a glacial ridge on the property is covered in rolling oak woodland including white, red, bur, and hill's oaks. An oak forest inholding is a worthwhile addition to any preserve, but the land is **also** home to a small woodland vernal pool and open wet meadow, the former providing breeding habitat for amphibians and invertebrates that are often hurting for such locales.”* I went on to explain that the parcel would eventually be deed to the District. Well, that happened. Good times!



60) Dense residential development on all sides is not where one might reasonably expect to find a high quality Illinois Nature Preserve, yet Exner Marsh, surrounded by the village of Lake in the Hills is exactly that. This wetland – a mix of open water and floating calcareous peat mats – is echoed in a 9.85-acre addition off of the south side of the preserve, which also adds a bit of upland just for variety. As an aside, the topographical and vegetative composition of this particular spot may well remind you of another peat map-centric locale; Volo Bog, which is only about fifteen miles distant. And indeed, Exner Marsh is well on its way to becoming Exner Bog; check back in a millennia or so to see the finished product.



61) The District closed out the year with the creation of a new preserve that was one of the highlights of *my* year. This 55.15-acre mix of dry-mesic white oak woodland and a small and quite uncommon mesic burr oak savanna – acquired with the support of the ***Prairie State Conservation Coalition*** – is home to what, to my mind, is a surprisingly large number of old growth trees, including a true rarity in the state; a witness (or bearing) tree, documented when McHenry County was first surveyed in 1837. These trees were found near the corner of Sections (i.e. the big squares that most of the state is still divided into, which is why the land looks like a grid when viewed from the air), and marked so that the spot being surveyed could be relocated later, making them as tangible a link to our state’s past as you’re likely to ever find. The preserve’s witness tree is but one of dozens of centuries old oaks, including white, red, and bur.



These remnants of an earlier time sit atop steep morainal hills, where they host a multitude of rare avian species, including the state threatened black-billed cuckoo, while lowlying wetlands complete an ecological mosaic that, invasive woody growth notwithstanding, is strikingly similar to what one would have seen walking the site two hundred years ago. The District will soon begin removing the invasive trees and shrubs that in more recent decades have short circuited the growth of new generations of the oaks and hickories that have for so long called the land home, and in so doing fully restore the healthy forest community that stood upon the land for millennia. Whether you’re partial to flora or fauna, this is one to pay attention to. (*Photo credit: MCCD*)

## ✿ U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

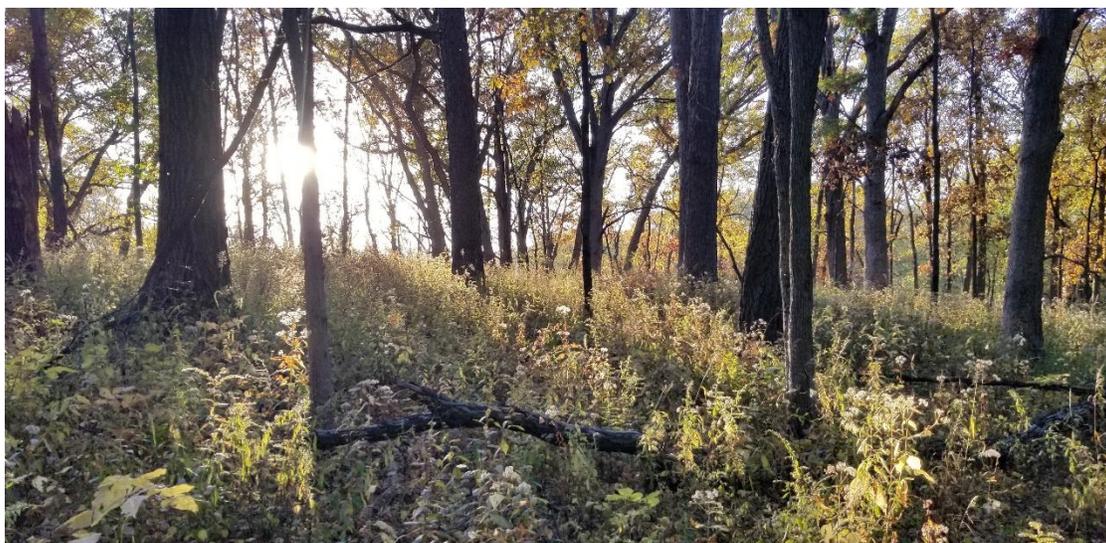
62) Last year I had the pleasure of discussing what by any definition was one of the most impressive and surprising conservation projects not only of the year, but the decade; the acquisition of 948 acres in McHenry County by a coalition of land trusts for future incorporation into the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge.

That transition began in 2025, with the purchase from The Conservation Fund of 160.83 acres of wetland, agricultural fields and forest that, as it happens, is adjacent to an existing 10.82-acre parcel first protected in 2016 and which the FWS acquired four years later. The property lies about midway between the McHenry County Conservation District’s Glacial Park Conservation Area and North Branch Preserve, and is part of a contiguous protected tract over six miles long. A better note on which to close this section, I can not conceive.



## *Policy, Restoration, and Management*

For whatever reason, this time out I opened the previous two sections of the report with somewhat formal prose; the sort of thing you'd expect to see in a fundraising appeal or thinktank piece. Enough of that – let's keep it simple, and keep it real. 2025 featured not only a bunch of successes across the policy, management, and restoration spaces, but revelatory, *interesting* research and innovative new tools. I had a lot of fun writing these up. Here's hoping you have just as much fun reading about them.



*Diana Krug*

- ✿ The piping plovers are *back*, and back in force. Last year in these pages I detailed – at length – the profoundly innovative and arguably heroic work of a dedicated team of public agencies and private volunteers who saved the Montrose Beach nest of plovers Sea Rocket and Imani – one of only two such nests in the state – when storms threatened to inundate the diminutive endangered avian's eggs. If you're interested in an even more in depth and far more detailed overview of the project and its importance, I can't recommend [this](#) piece highly enough, written by some of the folks who were on the ground the entire time.

Both birds returned to Chicago in 2025, successfully rearing two chicks, and joined again by a second male, Pippin, who migrated down from Cat Island in Wisconsin. Not to be outdone were Pepper and Blaze – captive-reared chicks released in Waukegan in 2023 and proud owners of the *other* piping plover nest in Illinois circa 2024, during which they raised three chicks, one of whom was last seen with its mate on North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan. The two came close to repeating that feat last year, raising two new chicks who with their parents departed in the fall for winter grounds along or near the Gulf Coast.

This is a success story both locally and nationally that shouldn't be understated. By the 1980s, there were only 13 breeding pairs in the entire Great Lakes region – all in Michigan – leading to their listing on the Endangered Species list. By 2024, that had increased to 81 pairs; the largest since the species was declared endangered, and a number that likely rose again last year, thanks in good part to the dedication of the volunteers and professionals who monitor and protect the birds throughout the year, every year.

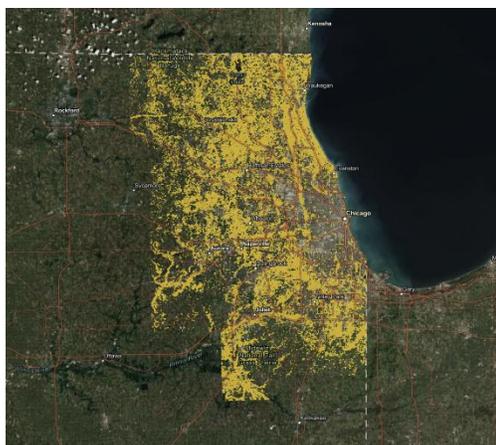


Imani & Searocket © breanddave on iNaturalist (CC BY-NC)

✿ Honeysuckle. Buckthorn. Multiflora rose. Oriental bittersweet. The four floral horsemen of the apocalypse are the bane of my existence, and a ginormous line item on almost any restoration and most management budgets. Rather than cutting and herbiciding their way to what at best is a tactical victory over these scourges, the Illinois DNR recently took a different approach at Chain O'Lakes State Park. What approach is that you ask? [Llamas. Also sheep. And an alpaca.](#) The idea is simple. Let the ungulates eat the invasive scourges which, in addition to being cost effective, revitalizes the often subpar soil microbial activity via a tool no chainsaw, lopper, or herbicide bottle can match – poop. Right then, I freely admit this unusual pilot program is in no way profound. But I love it.

✿ While the **Morton Arboretum** is well known for its extensive botanical bounty, I for one find their *research* initiatives of even greater value – which is saying something, given that the arboretum itself is well over 1,400 acres of arboreal goodness in the middle of one of one of the heavily developed counties in the state. That work is exemplified by an innovative tool brought to you in part by the same researcher who created the geospatial database of [remnant oaks](#) that identifies just about all oak groves in northeastern Illinois that have been extant for a century or more.

This new initiative used LiDAR and aerial photographs to model the prevalence of what they call shrubby invasives and what you or I would straight up call buckthorn and



I daresay there's a bit of work to be done. (*Morton Arboretum*)

honeysuckle, and provide a [comprehensive and interactive map](#) of the same. Their takeaway was that as of 2020 (the year of the photography used in the analysis) ~70% of the region's forests and woodlands were heavily infiltrated by these scourges. The data they produced is claimed to be 90% accurate and, having taken the extremely scientifically rigorous approach of comparing their layer with personal observations along the routes I regularly bike with my Dad, yeah, yeah I think they got this one. It's both useful tool and compelling call to action in one tidy package.

And as if *that* weren't enough, they *also* found time last year to shine a light on the importance of [urban forestry](#). No joke; a year or two ago a colleague showed me an analysis he had run that demonstrates there's nearly a 1:1 correlation between urban heat islands and lack of tree cover. Using remote sensing, the Arboretum team has estimated the land use of every community in Illinois, from tree canopies to impervious surfaces, making the information readily available in an easily accessible and understandable format.

- ✿ There are exceptions, but I'm generally skeptical when it comes to claims of imminent doom, whatever form they may take. That skepticism however isn't necessarily warranted, as the **Prairie Rivers Network** has demonstrated via a six-year [study](#) on herbicide drift published in 2024 but that I didn't learn of until it was written up in this excellent 2025 [article](#) – the latter of which justifies my including it in this year's report. Convoluted reasoning? Yes. But it's my report, so I can do what I want.

Anyhow, the study found herbicide damage at essentially every site they surveyed – including the half dozen sites located *more than a mile* from any potential source of said herbicide. Over 90% of tissue samples contained detectable levels of these emphatically deleterious herbicides, with the results confirmed by a completely separate study out of the **University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign** that same year. The likely impact of all this is deeply troubling, up to and including large scale floral and faunal die offs, and so IMO is well worth a concerted effort to mitigate the worst of what is a near ubiquitous issue. As an aside, that aforementioned article is excellently written such that you really should consider checking it out.

- ✿ The [I-View](#) protected lands database that I created and maintain has long purported to map all permanently protected natural lands in the state. Notice the qualifier in that assertion though? *Permanent*. Although I was well aware of the existence of term-limited conservation easements established by the Illinois DNR's [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program](#) (CREP), this is a group of properties I never had the capacity to document myself back when I was mapping the many perpetual easements that have been established through the program. That's a bit of a bummer, because they're ubiquitous throughout the central reaches of the state. How ubiquitous? 308 easements totaling 7,123.7 acres ubiquitous.

Following a profoundly impressive mapping effort on the part of the Department – and as a mapping guy, I know of which I speak – all have now been integrated into I-View, which removes the “permanently protected” caveat that's always applied to the protected lands database. On that note, CREP easements both temporary and perpetual are likely to play a significant role in the future of conservation in this fair state, as last year the program reopened after a long hiatus, and is already going strong.



Illinois Beach State Park  
(*Melissa Grycan*)

\* A few years back I went on at some length about the virtues of employing multiple layers of protection for a property; say, putting a conservation easement over a site owned by a land trust, or enrolling it into the Illinois Nature Preserves system. The impetus for my musings being the at the time recently announced plans by the Supervisor of the Homer Township Open Space District to sell three of the District's four properties for residential development and to convert the fourth into some manner of community center with 1-1.5K parking spaces.

While my answer to this challenge was to sit in a chair stewing, a trio of the state's premier nonprofit organizations took a slightly more productive approach. **Openlands** and **The Conservation Foundation**, alongside the **Illinois Environmental Council** worked with some awesome legislators to [amend](#) the Township Open Space article of the Township Code. And the best part? The chief sponsors of the bill in both houses represent my town.\* It's democracy in action.

Presumably following the logic that if a Township's residents voted to tax themselves for the purpose of establishing and building an Open Space District, they should bloody well be the ones to decide whether to *disestablish* and/or demolish it, the amended code



Illinois state capitol building (*Creative Commons*)

stipulates that in order to sell or in any other way dispose of property, two thirds of the Township's voters must agree to the proposal in a referendum during a regularly scheduled election. Try to do an end run by having the Township dissolved with the land thus being deeded to another unit of government? No good; the new owner is similarly bound by the requirement to actually obtain the consent of the people.

This is a fantastic resolution on several levels, but while they were at it, the team took the opportunity to further improve this seminal statute. Most prominently, the minimum size of a property acquired for open space purposes was reduced from 50 acres to 12, and the maximum term under which property may be leased to a third party was cut in half from 50 to 25 years.

Oh, in the event you're wondering what happened with the development proposals that started this legislative ride, they were shelved after significant public blowback, and the elected official in question was booted from office last April – and I swear I am not making this up – after condemning his opponent for the sin of securing bipartisan endorsements. As I said, a great resolution all around.

\* Wait. My small part of the municipality is in a different district because of gerrymandering? And both of *my* elected representatives actually voted against the bill? G\*d d\*\*n it. I hate everything.

- ✿ On the subject of seminal pieces of legislation that underlie all that we do, I welcome you to a return appearance after five years on tour by the Real Property Conservation Rights Act, aka the one that makes conservation easements. For an instrument that consistently forms the foundation for well over than half the land protection work successfully undertaken by the state's conservation land trusts, this one is of a surprisingly recent vintage (well, comparatively speaking), dating only to 1977. The drafters of that original text stipulated that easements could be held by conservation land trusts as well as federal, state, or local governments, and so it has been for the nearly half century since.

You notice who's not included in that list though? No? Well, I didn't either, and that's on me. Federally recognized tribal nations had no ability to hold a conservation easement in their own names, which yeah that's an embarrassing and quite frankly unacceptable omission given tribal governments are, well, officially recognized governments within the United States constitutional system, same as any other. It's an omission though that has come to an end as through an effort led by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation and The Conservation Fund, supported by IEC, TNC, PSCC (man that's a lot of letters...), and native tribes that once called the state home, the Act was [updated](#) last year to now recognize sovereign tribes as entities that can hold conservation easements, just as can their fellow governments.

- ✿ Circling back, you know who's probably more chuffed than anyone about those amendments to the Township Open Space article in the state code? [Campton Township](#), that's who. Because last April, the residents of this Kane County locale showed their support and trust in the Township's Open Space District in the most impactful way possible - with their vote. The successful \$17.6M bond referendum will among other things enable the Township to make capitol improvements to the various properties the District has acquired over the quarter century since its founding, and to expand those selfsame holdings by an estimated 400-600 acres.

As an aside, I'd be remiss if I failed to note that the referendum campaign was in part organized and managed by **The Conservation Foundation**, which maintains its flawless, nearly three decade track record of securing support for these invaluable initiatives - over two dozen successful referenda in the greater Chicago area at all levels of local government.



Butterfly milkweed on a remnant prairie (*Diana Krug*)

✿ There are more than a few glorified talking shops in this sector. Y'all know I'm right. Groups or organizations that put on one a heck of a Zoom meeting or annual soiree but, practically speaking, accomplish little else. **Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves** is not only emphatically *not* one of those, it's the diametric opposite. That's not hyperbole. This is an organization that exists to steward the lands enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system – both those owned by the public and by private individuals – and are they ever good at it. With a small paid staff complemented by a dedicated cadre of



volunteers across the state, Friends' groups do the yeoman's work that enables both flora and fauna in these natural sanctuaries to thrive. And it's darned diverse work too; just this last year involving herbicide, scything, endangered turtle collection (my personal favorite), prescribed burning, deer cage construction, species monitoring, training and planning sessions; the works. Now, ordinarily I'd

describe those efforts in some detail, but turns out I don't have to – the organization's [2025 Impact Report](#) not only does just that in far greater depth than I'd have space for here, but does so in a far, far more engaging way than I could ever hope to equal. It's *very* good. Yeah, I'm shocked too. I mean, these compendiums are so often a monotonous slog – as anyone who's forced themselves through my own turgid prose can attest – but this thing is really well written. Seriously, take a look. (*Photo credit: Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves*)

✿ As the name implies, the **Illinois Natural Areas Stewardship** program is devoted to arguably the most important aspect of conservation in as ecologically fragmented a state as Illinois, yet one that from my perspective has consistently been given short shrift. Providing support to 501(c)(3) organizations for the restoration and management of lands enrolled in the Illinois Nature Preserves system, the [program](#) – funded through the DNR's Natural Areas Acquisition Fund – fills what *was* a rather glaring unmet need.

Last year saw the awarding of 15 grants totaling \$1M. That million will support thirteen organizations working on 41 individual Nature Preserves and Land & Water Reserves. The funds will be put to a broad array of uses largely centered on invasive species control, with the equipment and support needed for prescribed fires being central to well over half of the projects. To quote myself from the 2024 edition of this tome, “given the ecological quality of most of the sites in question, from my perspective this partnership between state and private enterprise is unmatched in raw value.”

✿ This past fall, I had the privilege – and I say that in the truest sense of the word – of attending a talk by Dr. Gerould Wilhelm. After getting over the awe of being in the same room with the author of *the* seminal work on Chicago-area flora (said work having been on my bookshelf since University) and creator of the Floristic Quality Assessment (a tool so fundamental to determining an area's ecological integrity and that

has so proved itself that it's treated akin to a First Principle of conservation), I learned over the course of the presentation that prescribed fire was even more vital to the health of the prairie ecosystem than I had known; that for some sites, even bi-annual conflagrations are stretching things out too long. This followed in short succession the equally profound privilege of working with another giant of the field, Mr. Stephen Packard, assisting with analysis of prescribed fires in woodland and savanna, during which I learned of the similar import fire plays in maintaining the health of our state's forests (I'd always thought fire was primarily a grassland thing, with forests only needing to burn very occasionally to clear out deadwood and the like. Man was I ever wrong).

All of that is to say fire is a super important tool in the management kit; arguably the most important. Which is why the **Illinois Prescribed Fire Council** is such a valued partner. Bringing together practitioners from all walks of life to share methods and experience, the Council also documents said fires. In the fall 2024-spring 2025 season, they [tracked](#) 50,235 acres set to the drip torch across the state. As notable as that number is, it's likely going to get significantly bigger, as there're several large agencies that have yet to report the extent of their recent endeavors. *(Photo credit: Illinois Prescribed Fire Council)*



✿ A couple years ago in these pages I relayed some news that genuinely made me smile. And that's saying something, as generally when joy attempts to rear its head in my, um, head, my psyche beats it back with a stick. And what you may ask led to this uncharacteristic outbreak of good cheer? *Bison*. Specifically, the announcement that the **Forest Preserve District of Kane County** would be returning this totemic ungulate to the Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve, something that was only possible because of the sheer size of this 950-acre grassland. As I wrote at the time:

*...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...*

Well, the day of the reintroduction [finally arrived](#) last month, with bison returning to Kane County after a centuries long absence. Appropriately enough, the animals are

owned by the American Indian Center of Chicago, which will provide educational opportunities around the animals for the benefit of the native community as well as partner with the FPD to run a community science program. Also appropriate? All of this took place during the District's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I dare say <looking at you, every other Forest Preserve and Conservation District in the state> it's going to be hard to top that.



The bison return (*Forest Preserve District of Kane County*)

## *2024 Revisited*

Another year in which my completionist hopes were dashed against the jagged shoals of missed projects; those forests and prairies, wetlands and streams whose preservation escaped my gaze when last I set digital pen to equally digital paper. Whilst I dream still of the day this section will be but a memory, this is not that day... . . . . But you know what? I'm good with that, because it means we get to take a look at some really fun sites from all around the state. Join me then if you would for a final look at 2024.

### ✿ **Forest Preserve District of DuPage County**

I'll level with you. I've been experimenting with different search engines over the last year and a bit, as my traditional choice has by any objective measure been markedly deteriorating for the last several years. This however entails certain tradeoffs, as to my annoyance I've discovered that one thing that older search engine does a good deal better than the others I've tinkered with is uncover relevant news articles. Case in point, the December 2024 purchase by the FPDDC of a 34.9-acre horse farm as an addition to the now 831.9-acre Danada Forest Preserve. Now, that's an unquestionably good thing in and of itself, but what makes this especially sweet is the fact that this humble property directly links the District land to the 1,462-acre Morton Arboretum for the first time. That's significant, and I'm quite frankly more than a little surprised that no one called me out on missing it.



### ✿ **Friends of Nachusa Grasslands**

The Friends have come up a couple of times in this report, and we're not done yet. Apart from their work in the year just past, to my surprise – on account of, again, I didn't know the organization existed until about three weeks prior to when you're reading this – that recent transfer wasn't the only land acquired by the group for future incorporation into the Grasslands. No, this exceptional organization purchased three properties in 2024. The first is a 12.7-acre wooded parcel located to the west of the Nachusa headquarters building. The second is 82.7 acres of mixed agriculture, woodland, and open field anchored by a public road along its western extent, and the third a 56.4-acre agricultural field on the north side of the preserve that begins the process of linking together two distinct geographic units of the larger site.



## ✿ Natural Land Institute

The good folks at the Natural Land Institute have an impressively expansive portfolio. Not just land protection, but restoration, education, management, policy; the works. In fact, they're so busy, and so productive, it's possible they might just forget to tell me about a new easement. Not to worry; I'm sure whatever slipped through the cracks is a pedestrian affair of little interest to the wider world; something well suited to the tail end of this wordy tome, such that I can quickly note its existence and then move on, abjuring a lengthy or detailed summation of its merits. ... ..  
 ... What's that you say? It's a wetland mitigation bank? And the defining element is the *complete restoration* of a long channelized tributary of the Pecatonica River? ... Da\*\*it all.



So yeah. What we've got here is a project in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps that is taking 34.64 acres in southeastern Stephenson County whose most prominent features are a straight line ditch and acres of reed canary grass on either side and reestablishing a diverse wetland community. And these are not half measures, because that boring ditch is being restored to a fully meandering stream, with all the attendant benefits to life both terrestrial and aquatic. Just a really fun project, and one that I was as surprised as I was delighted to see.

## ✿ The Nature Conservancy

When talking land protection, you're almost always looking at fee owned properties or some type of easement. That's not exaggeration; well north of 98% of the sites in I-View are tagged with one of those two categories, and most of the remainder are either lands managed by a conservation group in a long-term agreement with the landowner, or, if you're the DNR, leased for conservation purposes. In but a handful of cases (literally), there is instead employed a fifth option – the life estate. Such was long the case with an 89.7-acre property across a road that marks the western boundary of the main body of TNC's Merwin Preserve at Spunky Bottoms, all but 6.3 acres of which was *also* subject to a conservation easement that the landowners had subsequently granted to the Conservancy. Those selfsame landowners gifted the eased land to TNC several years ago and then, in the closing days of 2024, decades of generosity were capped through the donation of that final small parcel, on which was found their home. There's nothing I can add that would do justice to the multiple gifts this selfless couple have bestowed not just on TNC, but on the people of Illinois, so I'll leave it here, and close this section on that very high note.



## Changes at the Top

- ✿ **Adam Bianchi** has taken on the role of Executive Director at the **Forest Preserves of Cook County**, overseeing the District's 68K+ acres. This would be a tall order for most anyone, but Mr. Bianchi was well prepared, most recently serving as the ranger for the White River National Forest's 312K acre Dillion Ranger District in Colorado and having spent over 15 years with the National Forest Service. He takes the reins from **Arnold Randall** who, over 13 years, led a revitalization of the state's oldest Forest Preserve District, turning it into what so far as I can tell is a legitimately efficient organizational machine (and *not* of the old Chicago style) and a restoration powerhouse.
  
- ✿ Most Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts cover an entire County, but the **Byron Forest Preserve District** was never going to be constrained by anyone's preconceived notions of geographic scale, thank you very much. Centered around the city and township of the same name in Ogle County, the District was fortunate last spring to retain the services of **Andrew Hawkins** as its new Executive Director. That is a name some reading this report will know well, and for good reason, as prior to his appointment Mr. Hawkins had served for seventeen years as the Director of Conservation at the Byron FPD's sister district in Will County; part of a decades long career in the conservation sector.
  
- ✿ **Citizens for Conservation** has, to some acclaim, really been upping both its land protection and restoration games over the course of the 2020s, most notably taking on the task of restoring an over 225-acre former horse stable and pasture to a mosaic of wetland, prairie, and savanna. A stellar land trust can benefit from stellar leadership, and that's exactly what they have in new Executive Director **Dr. Abigail Derby Lewis**. I was thrilled to hear that she had joined CFC, as her work as chair of the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission from 2022-2024 speaks for itself. Most however probably best know Dr. Lewis for her work at the Field Museum's Keller Science Action Center, where she led a variety of teams in applying research to effect real world change.
  
- ✿ The **Land Conservation Foundation** featured prominently this year, and it's no coincidence that the growing organization has recruited its first fulltime Executive Director in the eminently capable and equally skilled **Eric Mollahan**. For anyone who's had the misfortune of sitting next to me while I opine on the public markets (*normal* people talk about sports and the weather. *I* muse about the VIX and the S&P 500), you'll know that I'm critical of companies whose higher ranks are filled with folks with little to no experience in the actual industry. Mr. Mollahan is the cardinal opposite of this corporate caricature, with experience at both a municipal park district and the Illinois Natural History Museum. Most recently and prominently he was, until assuming this new role, the lead ecologist at a private land management company (which, fun aside, was also my very first employer post-University) working on the restoration of both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems across the greater Chicagoland area. He succeeds **Dr. Deanna Glosser**, who expertly helmed the Foundation through expansion of both its membership and land portfolio, and whom I for one hold in the highest esteem.

And that's a wrap. It's over. You're free! As always, thanks for joining me on this look back at 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.