

The background of the entire cover is a detailed oil painting of pine cones and needles. The pine cones are rendered in warm, earthy tones of orange, red, and brown, with visible brushstrokes giving them a textured appearance. The needles are long and thin, in shades of green and blue, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is dense and layered, with the pine cones in the foreground and needles extending into the background.

# THE SPROUT

**NICHES LAND TRUST | FALL 2021 | VOLUME 25 ISSUE 4**

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**Cover Painting "Glacial Relict White Pine" By: Gabriela Sincich**

*"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference" - Reinhold Niebuhr*

# *NICHES First Executive Director*

Gus Nyberg stepped down as NICHES' Executive Director a few months ago. He had been in this position for 14 years, a stretch over which NICHES Land Trust experienced continued growth and increased organizational stature. Gus' effect on the success of NICHES over this period cannot be overstated.

He grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, and first got involved in habitat restoration as a volunteer in high school working on prairies and oak woodlands. He attended the University of Illinois, and after graduating with a degree in biology, started working for The Nature Conservancy managing black oak savannas.

While employed by TNC, he joined the board of NICHES in 2004, and readily shared his knowledge of flora and fauna leading property tours. At that time NICHES had slightly over 400 members, 17 properties, and about 1,800 acres.

By early 2007, Gus was hired as NICHES' first executive director. He was selected for his prior experience with the organization and deep understanding of land management practices. With his hiring came NICHES' first step past being a completely volunteer led organization and into a new realm of growth.

During his tenure, a number of NICHES "firsts" occurred, no doubt due to Gus' influence, leadership, and dedication. NICHES opened an office in downtown Lafayette. Waterway cleanups, controlled burns, deer herd control were added to NICHES' conservation and restoration toolbox. The staff expanded, initially in stewardship, then into outreach and education.

In more recent years, Gus has been instrumental in the growth of the membership, properties, financial support, and the exposure of NICHES in the community. Participation and collaboration with the Wildcat Creek Foundation, Wabash River Enhancement Corporation, INPAWS, Indiana Land Protection Alliance, "Wednesdays in the Wild", and numerous other efforts and organizations has been significant. Mission fulfillment has been possible through cooperative partnership with community foundations and environmental visionaries.



Taking a walk in a field or woods with Gus is a botany lesson unmatched in any classroom. His energy and passion for everything in nature is infectious, and his ability to see the positive and bring out the best in people is rare. Whether working in the field, hiking, paddling, camping or in a meeting, he is able to bring joy to life and catalyze goal achievement.

Today we hold over 4,000 acres, number over 750 members, and are quite sound in our finances. Truly the success of NICHES cannot be attributed to any one individual. The founders of the organization, as well as all past and present staff members, volunteers, and supporters are significant in NICHES' growth and success. Our land trust will continue to thrive and grow in land protection and restoration, volunteers and membership, education, and influence.

At this moment, however, we must pause, and recognize that NICHES would not be where it is today were it not for the incredible dedication, vision, and contributions of its first executive director.

***-Thank You Gus!***



# *Interim Executive Director Update*

NICHES Land Trust is in a moment of change. For many, the word change causes an uncomfortable feeling. While change can certainly be uncomfortable, over the years I have come to realize that change is where hope lives. It is the place where the 'what is,' 'what is possible,' and 'what will be' all coexist. So many exciting possibilities for NICHES are ahead.

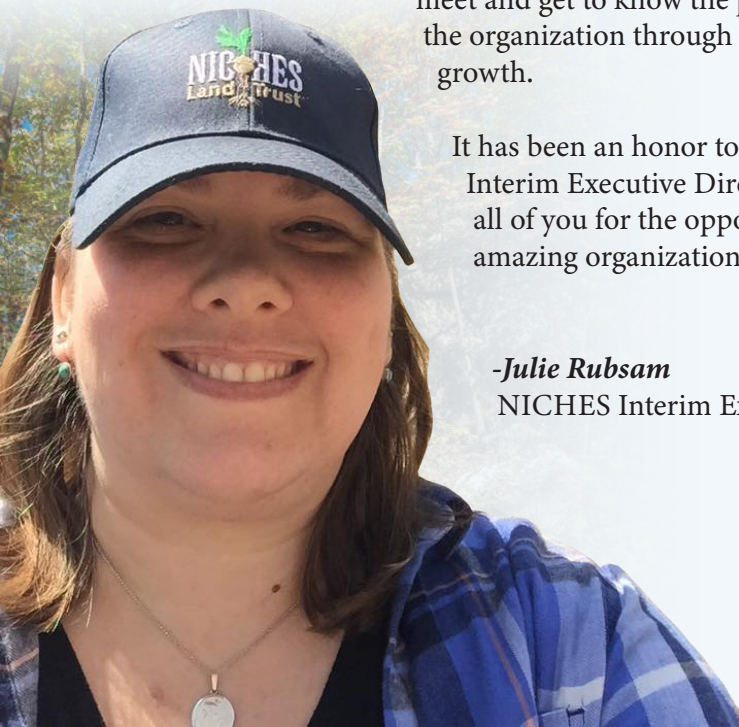
Change pushes us out of our status quo and demands a reaction. The last few months have been a whirlwind and I have been blown away by the staff's reaction to the changing times we are facing; there really is never a dull moment at NICHES. There is always stewardship work to be done and opportunities for new partnerships, acquisitions, projects, and more coming our way. The staff seamlessly expanded their duties to take on additional responsibilities, showing how truly dedicated they are to meeting our collective commitment to caring for the special places we protect.

Here we are, waiting together, in this moment of anticipation for the next step in NICHES' journey. As I write this, the organization is still searching for its next Executive Director. I am sure you are as anxious and excited as I am to meet and get to know the person who will lead the organization through its next phase of growth.

It has been an honor to serve as NICHES' Interim Executive Director and I thank all of you for the opportunity to lead this amazing organization, even for a moment.

***-Julie Rubsam***

NICHES Interim Executive Director



# *Signs in the Landscape*

Back in August I got restless and decided to visit some NICHES preserves, one I'd never seen and a couple favorites. Being a person who appreciates good land management (I used to handle stewardship for the Indiana Chapter of The Nature Conservancy), I naturally looked for evidence of good land management along the way. And I'm happy to say I found that evidence in abundance.

I started at Black Rock Barrens Nature Preserve. As I started up the trail to the rock bluff I remembered a visit here back in 2016 when NICHES hosted a stiltgrass management event for other land managers. Stiltgrass was just starting to pop up in northwest Indiana and NICHES had the start of infestations on several sites. It was a chance for other land managers who hadn't yet seen stiltgrass to visit and learn how to identify it, and to discuss control while helping to manage the NICHES site. I still recalled the location of stiltgrass along this very trail, and I searched the area very closely looking for those telltale short, broad leaves with a reflective strip along the midrib. None! I found none! It is incredibly hard to eradicate stiltgrass once it invades, but I tipped my field hat to the stewardship crew that stayed on top of this and managed to get rid of the stiltgrass.

Heading to the bluff I saw numerous small stumps and blackened tree bases that told me there had been both thinning in the understory and prescribed fire resulting in dappled sunlight reaching the floor of the woodland.

Unmanaged forest often has a very dense understory, which suppresses the light-loving woodland and barrens plants like those found at Black Rock Barrens.

Small cages made of chicken wire caught my eye. Inside were little white pine seedlings and I realized there must be a restoration going on. Curious for the details, once I got home I asked Bob Easter about the project. I got every detail I could have hoped for, including a video of a nearly two-hour talk Bob gave on the efforts to restore white pine to many NICHES property. I highly recommend listening to this talk by Bob; you'll learn the history of white pine in Indiana and why NICHES took on this restoration effort. Particularly impressive to me was the 'how?' The seed collection from remnant populations, the germination process, growing them in pots, planting trials – a lot of work has gone into returning white pine to where it once grew on these sites.



Given those cages, I had to ask Bob whether the site was being hunted to reduce the deer browsing pressure, which in an unhunted forest can keep many palatable tree species from reproducing successfully. He let me know that indeed, the site is hunted, and between 2011-2021 184 deer were removed across the entire Black Rock Barrens complex, over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of which were does (reduction of the number of does is the most effective way to keep deer populations low). Reducing deer numbers is essential if palatable plant species are to survive.

Onto Granville Sand Barrens, a site I've never seen before. Actually, I don't think I've ever been to a sand barrens before, which is a very rare plant community. I parked and started along the perimeter trail, admiring the diversity of the restoration planting adjacent to the remnant barrens. The short grasses, mostly prairie dropseed and little bluestem, were dominant, making it much easier to see the wildflowers (and for the wildflowers to thrive). I had to see more, so I left the trail and walked through the planting. I happened upon a metal stake next to a prairie willow, an uncommon species known from the area that was introduced to the site.

And then I saw the brilliant yellow flowers of hairy golden aster nodding in the breeze. This uncommon plant was in full bloom dotted through the restoration, moving in from the remnant populations nearby, confirming in its own way the good work happening here.



*Hairy golden asters growing at Granville Sand Barrens.*

As I wandered through, I smiled when I saw piles of dead Queen Anne's lace, pulled and piled to decrease this invasive species. Bob let me know afterwards they are also pulling several other invasive biennials from the site - poison hemlock, musk thistle, sweet clover, and garlic mustard (on the edges of the barrens). I know how many hours that kind of effort takes by volunteers and staff, all so that the planted species can establish well and ultimately force out the invasive plants.

My final stop was Holley Savanna, which I hadn't seen since The Nature Conservancy transferred it to NICHES in 2005. Back then, it was more forest than savanna, with close to 100% canopy closure and an understory denser than it should have been. Walking in, I was impressed at how different the restoration planting in the old field was compared to the one at Granville Sand Barrens. Lots of spotted bee balm and prairie cottonweed were here, two species absent from Granville. It was clear a lot of care was taken to match the restoration species to what would have been found on each specific site. Wait – more cages! Some cages protected bur oaks, planted to soften the edge of the savanna and extend it into the restoration. Others had bunch flower (*Melanthium virginicum*), a rare plant added to this site.

I walked from the planting into the actual savanna and stopped short in happy surprise to enjoy the incredibly open canopy and understory. Certainly there was evidence of prescribed fire, but what else happened here to turn what I remembered as a forest into a true savanna? Again, Bob provided the answers. A whole lot of tree girdling, invasive shrub removal, and finally, a management harvest of many trees from the property in 2020. That final step not only moved the site towards true savanna structure but provided funds for the stewardship endowment. That's a stewardship win-win!

It was getting late and as I drove home I reflected on the long track record NICHES Land Trust has for good land management and restoration of preserves. I've long been a fan of NICHES because of this clear focus and it was reassuring to see all the evidence of this hard work on the ground. A wonderful day, but I need to plan another adventure to see more NICHES' preserves!

**-Ellen Jacquart**

President of the Indiana Native Plant Society







Black Rock shrouded in a tapestry of fall colors.

*Photograph by: Chad Phelps.*





# *Black Rock Society Dinner*

On September 18th NICHES Black Rock Society Members gathered at our new Parkers Hickory Grove Farm Preserve in West Lafayette for our annual organizational update, dinner, and celebration. This year's event was held outdoors to accommodate for the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and included presentations from staff members, catered box dinners from the Juniper Spoon, and guided hikes through the property. NICHES wants to thank this incredible group of supporters for helping us push past our 25th anniversary year in the strongest position possible!





# Indiana Stewardship Gathering

On September 22nd and 23rd, part of NICHES' stewardship staff was able to attend the annual stewardship gathering. The stewardship gathering was hosted and organized by Red-tail Land Conservancy with support from the Indiana Land Protection Alliance. Attendees from across the land trust community were able to participate in discussion and hikes, ultimately creating a more connected and informed group of stewards.



NICHES was instrumental in helping found this event and was the first land trust to host. At the first gathering, attendees (including Ellen Jacquart) worked to scout and pull stiltgrass, a new invasive species at the time. Through the years, this event has grown and continues to be a great resource for stewardship staff.



We all realize that nature doesn't understand humanity's arbitrary borders and therefore good management must be completed by a statewide effort. Partnerships like this ensure NICHES' impact not only occurs locally, but on a much broader scale.

**-Justin Harmeson**  
NICHES Land Steward



# Volunteer Update



On September 11th, volunteers completed this year's 3rd and final creek cleanup on Wildcat Creek. Leaving these waterways trash free offers a healthy home to native aquatic species and inspiration to those who enjoy their waters. (Sponsored by: Apollos Water & Aquarium World).

On September 12th NICHES volunteers participated in our second annual Monarch butterfly tagging program. Two sessions of volunteers helped contribute to the gathering of information about how climate-trends and human encroachment affect the monarch butterfly migration patterns, overwintering sites, and population sizes.



On October 16th, volunteers gathered at Granville Sand Barrens to help collect seeds for a restoration at Cicott Park in Warren County. The restoration will help boost the biodiversity and usable habitat of the park while also reducing the amount of grass area that needs regular mowing. By collecting seeds just a few miles upriver, we are helping preserve local genetics specifically adapted for survival in our local microclimate.

On October 23rd, NICHES hunters and volunteers gathered at our Shawnee Bottoms Preserve in Fountain County for our second large-scale trash cleanup of the year. Over the course of the day, volunteers helped remove and dispose of 30+ cubic yards of trash. Removing the trash helps improve the health and natural quality of the ecosystem and also reduces potential hazards during prescribed fires.





# *Scholer Beef Farm Update*

Not all acquisition stories have a happy ending. In fact, for every successful acquisition we announce, there are several opportunities that do not come to fruition for a myriad of reasons which you never hear about. The story of our attempt to acquire sections of the Scholer Beef Farm is one we felt we needed to share. So many of you were a part of this once in a lifetime opportunity for NICHES, and we are grateful you made it possible for us to dream big. The Scholer Beef Farm is 883-acres of land acquired by Purdue in 1957 and was used as part of their cow-calf production. There have been whispers for a little while now that the Purdue Research Foundation would be selling the farm and in August of this year, we knew Scholer would be going to auction in October. This was a HUGE opportunity for NICHES Land Trust!

Why? Bob Easter, NICHES' Stewardship Director, explains: "The Scholer Beef Farm represents a rare opportunity for NICHES and all of its private and public partners to come together and add another 883 acres of protected land to the area, which would functionally connect over 2,000 acres and eleven properties where NICHES is actively working. This is an opportunity to complete ownership of, and connect a set of, high-quality preserves in the drainages through the upland plain which feeds them and continue working to restore the ecological integrity of an overlooked natural treasure at the landscape level. If the Scholer Beef Farm were protected for conservation in its entirety, along with the properties already protected in the area, we would be just a few parcels away from protecting a natural area of over 3,000 acres, more than 21 of our 24 state parks, in a fantastic rural setting which is just minutes west of Purdue Campus and West Lafayette."

With just 6 short weeks before the auction, NICHES got to work evaluating the parcels and raising funds to put us in a good position to participate in the auction. Knowing the entire farm would require between \$5 - \$6 million dollars, we identified 4 tracts on the eastern edge of the farm that would connect land currently in an estate plan to NICHES, Potawatomi Trail, and Black Rock. NICHES raised almost \$1 million from the Roy Whistler Foundation, TNC, and more than half coming from private donors. Auction night was exciting but, in the end, a singular individual bought the entire farm. We have hopes that the new owner will be interested in a relationship with NICHES but, for now, we continue to look ahead to other opportunities.

# Developments at Clegg

Big changes have been happening at our organizations headquarter property, Clegg Memorial Garden, this year! In late October we broke in our brand new Duke Upland Trail with our 2nd annual Clegg Jack-o-lantern Hike. Over 400 visitors signed up to hike the trail over Halloween Weekend and vote on their favorite out of 186 locally carved pumpkins. We want to thank all the volunteers, trail builders, pumpkin carvers, and hikers who helped make this community event a success.



With the support of Duke Energy and the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette we are close to completing our new push-button crosswalk that will help make visiting Clegg safer for our over 7,000 annual visitors. Before hitting the trails, hikers will first be greeted by a new Duke Observation Platform adjacent to the natural play area. This new space will provide a place for gathering, viewing, and learning about nature. . This new observation deck will provide better seating areas, stairs to the trails off the rear section of the porch to better facilitate the flow of people and feature interpretive signs (shown below) to help educate visitors about local native species by highlighting information about common species and how to identify them. We hope you can make it out to Clegg soon to see our new improvements firsthand and enjoy a hike!





# Partners in Conservation

NICHES is proud to be a SIA Foundation 2021 Fall Grant Recipient!

“The Subaru brand is synonymous with the stewardship of our natural resources. The SIA Foundation is proud to continue supporting the NICHES Land Trust.”

-Ed Wulbrecht,  
the SIA Foundation President



NICHES Interim Executive Director Julie Rubsam with  
SIA Foundation Board Representative Scott Riggins

Between November 18th and January 3rd Bob Rohrman Subaru will donate \$250 in your name for every vehicle purchased or leased as part of this years ‘Share the Love event’. Over the years this event has raised over \$60k for NICHES!



## Thank You to our Additional Sponsors!



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On Saturday October 30th NICHES Land Steward Justin Harneson proposed to his girlfriend Ali at our Clegg Memorial Garden Property in Lafayette. The two stopped in around noon to hike the new Duke Upland Trail and check out the 186 locally carved Jack-o-Lanterns that were set up as part of our annual Halloween Hike. Little did Ali know the last two pumpkins of the hike were carved to read “Marry” and “Me?” and a photographer was waiting in ambush around the corner to capture the moment. In true NICHES style Justin popped the question in the forest surrounded by a beautiful tapestry of fall colors, and she said yes! We wish them both all the best in this next part of their journey together and their many adventures to come.