

# THE SPROUT



NICHES LAND TRUST | SPRING 2021 | VOLUME 25 ISSUE 2

Fairgrounds Oaks Project | Working at a Landscape Level | 2020 Volunteer of the Year

*"I work even in the middle of the day, in the full sunshine, and i enjoy it like a cicada." - Vincent Van Gogh*

# *Executive Director Update*

The cicadas have come! After 17 years, adult periodic cicadas are here, emerging from the ground and loudly calling to mate and dominating the natural, and in some places, the urban scene of summer 2021. Their emergence is a sign of a major cycling of energy and biomass that has been accumulating in the soil since 2004, and the seemingly limitless cicada abundance will help lead to the successful hatching and raising of young for many other species from fish to birds. And those species that raise large broods today, will have their own future impact years from now in an ever-changing world.



The flux wrought by a sudden altered flow of energy in the natural system is certainly something that all of us can relate to as we work our way through the sudden changes brought by the corona virus in 2020/2021. As we move forward and assess the world we are now in, we will be discovering impacts to our human and natural systems, some of which we will mourn and some we will celebrate. May we all approach the change to come with an open mind, pivot, grow and change accordingly.

NICHES has come a long way since the last emergence of the periodical cicadas in our service area. As you will read in this newsletter big steps forward were made just in this last quarter. From our work to engaging neighbors at Whistler-Hare woods in a massive invasive removal effort, to the work of volunteers such as Chad Evans saving the genetics of the Tippecanoe County Fairground Oaks, the community that surrounds and sustains our organization has always been the wind behind our wings. Unlike the cicadas we do not have the luxury of taking any breaks and we cannot expect the natural world to remain unchanged in our absence.

NICHES Land Trust thanks you for your ongoing support of our conservation efforts to improve the natural world. Together we are stronger and can be the change that is needed to secure another 5,000+ acres of land and a trail from Delphi to Portland Arch before the next emergence of the periodic cicadas in our community.

*-NICHES Executive Director, Gus Nyberg*  
[gnyberg@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:gnyberg@nicheslandtrust.org)



# Summer Adventure Camp

Do you know a nature minded 11 - 14 year old who likes to hike, climb, float and explore? Our Summer Adventure Camp is just around the corner and we still have a few spots available! NICHES camp offers an immersive and hands-on experience that is focused on building a lasting connection between campers and the natural world. Register online at [nicheslandtrust.org](http://nicheslandtrust.org)



*Week 1: June 7-11 (Avaliable)*

*Week 2: June 14-18 (Full)*

*Week 3: June 21-25 (Full)*



For questions about camp or financial assistance email Sam Cody at [sam@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:sam@nicheslandtrust.org).

Thank you to  
this years camp  
sponsors!



LAFAYETTE  
URBAN MINISTRY



LAND VAL•UES

# *Since the Last Sprout*

*A review of the highlights from the last 3 months*

**On March 7th**, NICHES hunters and volunteers mobilized at our Shawnee Bottoms preserve in Fountain County for an ambitious cleanup operation. The mission was to remove several large dumps scattered throughout the 500 acre properties' largest forest. The dumps were relicts from the land's past, born out of a time where the woods was commonly viewed as a convenient location for purging farm and household wastes. Due to equipment limitations and the tricky interior locations of the dumps, staff and volunteers have previously only been able to attack the longstanding problem in a piecemeal fashion. Larger items, like major household appliances and bails of cattle fencing, had to remain in situ after being excavated from their mud embanked tombs. As the heavy snows of February were melting we reached out to the local community of neighbors, hunters, and volunteers that surrounded the property to begin formulating a plan to tackle the massive project in a single event. As it has in the past, the community rallied, and in no time there was a small army of trucks, trailers, ATV's, winches, and tractors assembled and poised to remove the garbage once and for all.

When the day of the cleanup came over 20 people set out in groups to wrestle the contents of the dumps out of the woods and into a roll-off dumpster that was stationed in a central location. The machines ran all day as the crews clawed over 60 cubic yards of trash out of the preserve. At the end of the day everyone celebrated the accomplishment with drinks and deer burgers at Scott's Pond. Over the weeks that followed, several volunteers returned to the property to help remove and recycle several tons of scrap metal. The massive cleanup effort was long-awaited at it will ensure that future visitors to NICHES largest preserve will have a place to reconnect with nature free from unsightly intrusions of humanity.



Photo by  
Brooke Sauter

*On April 3rd*, several months of honeysuckle removal, trail construction, and preparation culminated in the public dedication of Parkers Hickory Grove Farm, our newest nature preserve on the outskirts of West Lafayette. The event included an interactive performance from the Greater Lafayette Dance Collective, speeches from the Parker Brothers who grew up on and donated the land, and a reading of an original piece of poetry by author and NICHES volunteer Sam Love.

Here,  
we take inspiration from the land, this story  
told through the movement  
of leaves and grasses,  
through the contour of the terrain,  
in the meeting of field and forest.  
The presence of life.



We take lessons from the land, this school  
and lessons given  
we can apply to any venture,  
the wisdom of the pond and the creek,  
the confidence of the trees.  
Land instructs life.



We take meaning from the land, these layers  
of memory and debris  
added to the earth --  
our connection from where  
we judge what is good  
and what is immoral.



We take from the land  
and often we give back only  
with the intent of later taking more.



But to give land -- this gift  
ensures that people  
will have space to grow  
and find esteem,  
belonging, and identity --  
connecting the self and the soil.

Generosity on this scale,  
with hope, disrupts depletion,  
and seeds possibility.

*-Sam Love*



Photos by Jason Rubsam



***Between March 4th and April 2nd*** NICHES worked with ‘Oak 5’ a 9 person Americorps NCCC team on a variety of stewardship tasks throughout our service area. The work project is part of a partnership between NICHES and Camp Tecumseh that allows both organizations to utilize the extra help as we move into our busier seasons.

The team was instrumental in helping us conduct our spring prescribed fire program which included XX burns across XXX acres. Having a contained volunteer burn squad allowed us to assign fire gear to individuals at the start of the season which helped us eliminate an unnecessary COVID risk. Through their fire training and shadowing of experienced staff the team members had a unique opportunity to learn about fire ecology firsthand and in the field. By our final burn of the season the team felt confident enough to take over the reins which resulted in our first all-female lead burn in NICHES history!



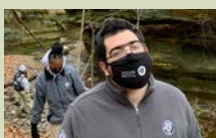
Bri and Maddie, line leaders of NICHES 1st female lead burn.



Tibbs planting a white oak by hand at our Frogs' Glory preserve.

The team also assisted in planting and caging several thousand oak trees in Tippecanoe, Warren, and Carroll counties. The saplings were rescued as acorns from 200+ year old trees that were removed from the Tippecanoe County fairgrounds in 2018 (see ‘Fairground Oaks Project’ for more info). Having the extra hands available to build and install cages will ensure that a higher percentage of the trees survive herbivory from white-tailed deer. Other projects during their service project included trail maintenance, trash cleanup, invasive species removal, and spring cleaning at our Clegg Memorial Garden Headquarters.

Getting to know and work this dynamic group of young adults from across the country was a pleasure and their service helped us get an important head start on our long list of annual stewardship tasks. Over the course of their 4 weeks stay with NICHES the group cumulatively put in over 1,600 volunteer hours for the organization. Thank you Oak 5 and best of luck on your future projects with Americorps and beyond!







Virginia Bluebells at Williams Woods. *Photograph by: Chad Phelps.*





# Fairground Oaks Project

In March NICHES worked with a 9 person Americorps team to plant and cage several thousand trees across 7 preserves in Tippecanoe and Carroll Counties. The saplings were rescued as seeds from the 200+ year old trees cut down at the Tippecanoe County Fairgrounds and graciously donated to NICHES by WLFI's Chief Meteorologist, Chad Evans. Below is the story, in Chad's own words, of what led him to embark on this project to save the genetics of these cherished local giants.

The genesis for this project began with my literal “roots” as a child growing up on the “gray prairies” of the flat, Illinoian Till Plains of the Wabash Lowland in Southwestern Indiana. I noticed prairie remnants at a young age along the local railroads, county roads, and ditches. I found that many of the local species differed slightly in morphological characteristics from the same species I saw in central Illinois and west-central Indiana.

Due to the interesting genetic variance of the species, I began collecting seeds of these prairie plants and growing them at home. I also noted that our town park was dominated by very large, impressively-burled and contorted Post Oaks (*Quercus stellata*) that reminded me more of the Cross Timbers region of Oklahoma and Texas than the fertile Wabash Lowland of Indiana. I found that Post Oak acorns gathered from Eolian sand dunes 10 miles to the west did not survive the wetter, silty-clay flats of the park that had vernal pooling in spring. However, the seedlings from acorns of the park Post Oaks absolutely thrived as I planted the offspring to keep the Post Oak grove going. I noted that the larger size of the trees and the larger leaves of the park Post Oaks differed to the Eolian sand barrens Post Oaks.

I also found that there was an entire ecosystem wrapped up in the Post Oaks of the park. Great Crested Flycatchers were nesting in cavities of the trees, as were Red-headed Woodpeckers and Eastern Wood Pewees were frequent in the park. It is the only location I have seen Eastern Bluebirds naturally nesting in tree cavities. Dozens of moss and lichen species grew on the Post Oaks, bees had natural hives in the trees, gall insects and numerous native moth / butterfly species were utilizing the large old-growth grove.



Old growth Post Oaks growing in Chad Evans hometown park.



So, in 2018 when I saw a similar grove located at the Tippecanoe County Fairgrounds being clear-cut in Lafayette, it brought my love of my childhood Post Oak grove all back and I wanted to save the genetics, just like those trees.

For weeks I gathered many 5-gallon buckets of acorns (some while the trees were being actively cut), planted them in beds at home in the fall and mulched them with native oak-hickory leaves and hardwood mulch. I manually plucked weeds for two summers in the beds with thousands of oak seedlings, even irrigating them at times. Before they started their third season, I dug a portion of them manually last fall and heeled them into trenches, then dug many more this spring when soil conditions were fit. I soaked them in water with fertilizer, dusted with peat mulch and bagged them for the NICHES' projects. The majority of the trees were White Oaks and Swamp White Oaks with some Chinkapin and Black Oaks. They belong to their ancestral homes to grow and evolve as they did for many years in the grove without risk of being cut. These trees belong to future generations that will stroll through NICHES' preserves.



(Left to right) Collecting acorns from fairground oaks, planting them into beds at home, and preparing saplings for NICHES projects

Just as I had seen in the Post Oak grove, an entire ecosystem existed with the Tippecanoe County fairgrounds oaks. Different species were found at each layer in the oaks from base of the trees and lower limbs to canopy flora and fauna. It is not a matter of planting “native” trees (from another part of the state or Midwest) at a preserve or site, but to bring the entire native ecosystem from top to bottom back. A grove of oaks or a prairie with linkage back thousands & thousands of years may have local genetic endemism and to find an extensive grove of such advanced age in a prairie-barrens-forest transition area is rare. I wanted to make sure these trees’ (dating back to 1810) could live on in perpetuity where they are locally adapted.

*-Chad Evans*

# *Working at the Landscape Level*

In 2019-2020 NICHES added some quality preserves in Fountain County with the purchase of Whistler-Hare Woods (100 acres) and donation of Snyder-Marshall Woods (41 acres). Both properties contain some prime natural areas with remarkable botanical diversity, including clear-running streams, seepage wetlands, and impressive sandstone exposures. Whistler Hare even contains a handful of remnant white pines growing in the acidic soils above its largest rock house.

Whistler-Hare also came with an overgrown Christmas tree farm of about 7 acres and about 30 acres in the southwest corner of the property filled with non-native Osage-orange, black locust, and a nearly impenetrable thicket of autumn olive and Amur honeysuckle. The quality portions of the preserve need little more than some maple thinning and prescribed fire for the understory to bounce back, however for a full recovery of the entire property the stands of invasive shrubs would have to be dealt with.

The USFWS has been a key partner in helping us fund many projects in Warren and Fountain Counties including several in Shawnee Township. I walked Whistler-Hare with our USFWS rep, Julia, in the fall of 2019 and she agreed that this would be a great place to partner again. As she was leaving I asked if it would be possible to add some neighbors to the project if I could get them on board, and she said we could work out agreements to extend the project to neighboring properties.

As work on previous projects moved forward, we began to build relationships with the local community of neighbors. In the fall of 2019, we invited some to join in the deer cull at Whistler-Hare. At the start of winter, we offered up a free 'cut-your-own' Christmas tree from the old farm.



NICHES Staff meeting under a rock house at Whistler-Hare Woods



As 2020 unfolded, I studied the map and saw that if we could get 6 additional landowners to join the project, we could clean up all the thick invasive shrub thickets between Whistler-Hare and Snyder-Marshall. I shared extension papers with neighbors explaining the impact of the invasive species and the hurdles they created for our conservation goals. As they began using the new preserve at their doorstep we took the opportunity to lead hikes and share the good, the bad, and the ugly to highlight the distinction between areas in recovery and those that still needed work. As the relationship between NICHES and the community of neighbors developed it started to become clear to all parties involved that the invasive shrub thicket was a shared problem that would present a mutual benefit if removed.

We added more of the neighbors to the deer cull in 2020 and eventually convinced all 6 neighbors to join the project. Which in the end, is 180 acres in scope, with about 70 acres needing Fecon mowing and follow-up spraying. We attempted to have USFWS bring a Fecon operator up to work on the project, but COVID restrictions wouldn't allow travel for their operator, so we called in our friends at Ecologic LLC to help us get the mowing done. As they mowed down acre after acre of honeysuckle through February and March, I helped guide them and the neighbors through the process and worked on sugar maple thinning in the oak/pine woods. Before the end of March, the Fecon mowing was completed including the old Christmas tree farm, which was nursing many young oak trees that were worked around beautifully by the Ecologic operators. This project, in particular the involvement of the neighboring properties, is a major accomplishment for NICHES and it is an example of what we are trying to do across our service area; work on ecosystem issues at the landscape level, engage the public to join in conservation, and build a culture of natural areas management. NICHES work does not take place in a vacuum, what we do is affected by what takes place upstream and in turn affects the health of the system downstream. The more aware and involved neighboring landowners are, the better we can work together to create a matrix of high quality habitat for native plants and animals to thrive in.

**-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter**  
**[rlaster@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:rlaster@nicheslandtrust.org)**

Before and after pictures of the invasive thicket captured by a neighbors trail camera



# 2020 Volunteer of the Year

3 years ago, when I took on the position of NICHES Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator I remember one of the first messages to my official work email was from someone named Matt Zeller. He warmly welcomed me to the NICHES crew and let me know that he has been an active volunteer for a while. As I grew into my new position, Matt became a face nearly as familiar as my other coworkers. In the beginning when the average attendance of volunteer workdays was only a fourth of what it is now, it was a comfort to have a volunteer as reliable and involved as Matt. Over the years I've come to know Matt as a good friend and enjoy hearing stories from his childhood growing up in Germany and about his work with x-ray crystallography at Purdue.

In 2020 as everyone's world slowed down to the COVID-19 pandemic, Matt put his freshly liberated schedule to work for NICHES. In addition to attending almost every public volunteer workday, Matt also took on several independent projects at our Beineke Memorial preserve clearing fencing and honeysuckle. Matt is also a key member of the Clegg Trail Committee which meets every weekend during the growing season to construct and maintain trails at our headquarters property. Only counting his time spent working independently, Matt put in a staggering 360 hours throughout the year, that's almost an hour a day including weekends!

At NICHES annual meeting on April 10th the organization was humbled to name him as the 2020 volunteer of the year. As a token of gratitude he was awarded with a watercolor painting by local artist and NICHES board member Terry Lacey depicting a local creekside ecosystem (a habitat he has no doubt played a direct role in improving). Thank you Matt for the incredible passion, work ethic, and warm heartedness that you bring to every volunteer event. From the first volunteer workday I ever set up in 2019 to yesterdays garlic mustard pull at Berkshire Tarnowski you've been a friend and a comrade through it all!

**-NICHES Volunteer Coordinator, Sam Cody**  
[sam@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:sam@nicheslandtrust.org)



Matt Zeller "A friend to NICHES, not to honeysuckle"



# Thanks for all the Love!

Thanks to support from Arrow Head Country RC&D, NICHES is creating digital interpretation for our Jasper and Newton County properties. This information will be accessible via an app, stay tuned!



We are honored to be included in this year's "Share the Love" event through Bob Rohrman Subaru. The event raised \$8,764.22 to help our organization further its conservation mission.



## Thank You to our Additional Sponsors!



*Driggs & Associates*



For more information on sponsorships, contact our Deputy Director, Julie Rubsam at [jrubsam@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:jrubsam@nicheslandtrust.org) or call 765-423-1605.



In late April NICHES Stewardship Director Bob Easter was pulling garlic mustard at a preserve in Fountain County when he encountered a small orchid growing out of the base of a tree. Nearby preserves have supported known populations of putty root and yellow lady-slipper orchids; however, this particular species was not immediately recognizable. After some research it was identified as a state endangered frog orchid (*Dactylorhiza viridis*), named after the resemblance its flowers have to a frog's face (at least to those with a vivid imagination). The real surprise came later when it was discovered that the last time this orchid species was reported in Indiana was over 40 years ago at the Dunes! Uncommon finds like this one help remind us why we do the unsavory work of removing invasive species.



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