

THE SPROUT



NICHES LAND TRUST | FALL 2022 | VOLUME 26 ISSUE 3

A Vision for the Future | Mandela-Washington Fellowship | Summer Stewardship Update

Cover art by: Gabriela Sincich

"The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it." Robert Swan

Executive Director Update

Happy Autumn, NICHES Land Trust Members!

The Fall Equinox ushered in the seasonal crisp air, a welcomed break to the heat and humidity of summer and rousing reminder of prescribed fire season to come. At NICHES, the long days of this summer were spent in celebration and deep dedication to our work.

On August 21, 50+ NICHES friends gathered at our headquarters, Clegg Memorial Garden, to celebrate 27 years of protecting natural areas in West Central Indiana. Attendees shared conversations, hikes, and a potluck of home-cooked food from local gardens and kitchens. We rejoiced all the recent upgrades to Clegg that make our headquarters more inviting and enjoyable to guests, including the road safety crossing, new furniture and signage on the porch, and the Duke Energy Upland Trail. We cheered that NICHES was formally re-accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission! We thanked the generosity of our community that exceeded our \$10k fundraising goal and ended our birthday campaign at \$12,013 raised for local conservation efforts. We reveled in having a 5-person stewardship team working full time this summer to implement high quality care for over 4,000 acres under NICHES protection. Thank you to Centier Bank for sponsoring our birthday campaign and everyone who helped make it a HUGE success!

On September 17, we hosted our Black Rock Society Dinner at the Wells Cultural Center in Lafayette. Members of our Black Rock Society have donated land, included NICHES in their estate plan, or given a sizeable gift annually or over their lifetime. It was a joyous occasion for all. Staff and Board members shared reports on NICHES ongoing while we shared a delicious meal catered by Juniper Spoon. It was personally meaningful for me to meet more NICHES members that have profoundly influenced our organization and contributed



NICHES 27th Birthday Event attendees posing for a photo on our new Duke Energy Upland Trail at Clegg Memorial Garden.

greatly to the high standing we hold in the community. I had the privilege of meeting the friendly faces that have gifted the land to NICHES I've enjoyed hiking over the years. During the event, Jim McGlone presented a beautiful photo of Cranberry Marsh and shared his family connection to this preserve. Cranberry Marsh is a 230-acre wetland habitat in Warren County owned by the McGlone family and protected by NICHES through a conservation easement. Jim served on the NICHES board for 6 years and remains an active member in the organization. Jim gifted the photo to NICHES for enjoyment at our headquarters.

Long in the works but formally completed after these celebrations occurred, NICHES acquired 194 acres directly adjacent to our Whistler Wildlife Area/Granville Sand Barrens preserves. This new property is named the Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash (East) and protects 1.2 miles of Wabash River Floodplain. These acres farmed corn and soybeans for many years but are now enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easement program with the United States Department of Agriculture. This conservation easement prohibits farming and development, and the program provides funding for restoration.

Planning for the restoration of floodplain habitat from agricultural production is underway and the field work will begin soon. We are honored to implement comprehensive management of what is now 274 acres contiguous protected land. Protecting and restoring the Wabash River Floodplain is a focal point in NICHES' 2030 strategic plan. The restoration will improve water quality and hydrological processes in the Wabash River, Indiana's State River. One specific and special benefit of this restoration is expanding habitat for the Plains Leopard Frog, an endangered species living at the Roy Whistler Wildlife Area. We thank our funders the Laura Hare Charitable Trust, the Roy Whistler Foundation, the McAllister Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette, and private donors for making this acquisition a reality.

We have a beautiful community so strongly committed to our mission to protect, restore, and sustain natural areas. Thanks to all of you, the passionate individuals working together for a better future, we have so much to celebrate.



Jim McGlone presenting a photo of Cranberry Marsh at the 2022 Black Rock Society Dinner Gathering.

-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis
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A Vision for the Future

As a child growing up in south-eastern Indiana, I was extremely fortunate to have adults in my life that helped introduce and immerse me in the natural world. From helping my naturalist mother gather materials for public outreach programs to hiking trips with my dad and brother, the beauty and intrigue of the outdoors made a deep and lasting impression on me at a young age.

One experience that stands out is my time spent at a nature camp run by the Edge of Appalachia Nature Preserve in South Central Ohio. Even now, decades later, I can still replay some of these cherished memories in my mind as if they had occurred yesterday. I remember pulling a rainbow darter from a seine net and thinking, “How could a fish so magnificent exist in this little creek, and why is it so colorful if it spends most of its time living between rocks!?” I can recall the fascination I felt while looking at insects under a microscope and examining the tiny hairs and appendages that help them move through and sense the world. It was there that I learned what native ecosystems were and what threats they face in our constantly developing world. Little did I know it at the time, but these experiences would go on to shape my education and career path as an adult.

The curiosity and love for nature that I developed as a child is what moved me to study Environmental Science at Purdue University. It's what made my ears perk up when NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter, gave a presentation to one of my classes about the incredible conservation work the organization was leading in this region. Now, many years after those cherished memories of my childhood were forged, I have the incredible honor and privilege of directing NICHES Land Trust's Summer Nature Camp program.

My ultimate goal for the program is to provide some of those same foundational experiences to our campers. The program seeks to present the natural world as something that is fun to play in and interact with, something that is fantastically complex and worth your attention, and above all something that is in danger and worth protecting.

The mission of our organization upon incorporation states that “*NICHES Land Trust is a vision for the **future**. Our goal is to help preserve the various elements of our landscape and provide scenic beauty, wildlife habitat, open areas, and natural places for the enjoyment of current and **future generations**.*” Children are both the future of our organization and the future stewards who will someday be entrusted with the natural areas we are recovering. The full process of ecological rehabilitation is multi-generational. It is essential that children today have numerous positive experiences in nature for them to grow up and view it as a resource that is worth both loving and protecting.

Between June 13 and July 1st, NICHES hosted our annual Summer Adventure Camp Program. Activities included floating local waterways, hiking NICHES preserves, camera trapping, electro fishing, hydro dipping, dissecting owl pellets, radio telemetry races, making pizzas in a cobb oven, and feeding foxes, buffalo, and wolves at Wolf Park. Thank you to our camp sponsor Geswein Farm & Land and our local partners that helped make this opportunity possible!



Summer Steward Reflections

One of my favorite parts about working for NICHES this summer was exploring many of the properties before completing stewardship work at each location. It was so neat to see how unique each site was, ranging from the small gravel hill prairie at Carter's Point to the towering sandstone faces at Honey Branch Bluff. A big task that I was involved with over the summer was completing inspection reports of each property to assess the invasive plants on the site and to note important native species that future management efforts will benefit. Completing these reports enhanced my ability to evaluate habitat conditions and prioritize tasks. I also helped with the summer camp, and it was so much fun to watch the kids immerse themselves in all the nature-based activities that we had planned for them.

- Jada Laycock

Being a seasonal steward with NICHES was an amazing experience. From invasive work to trail building to helping out with summer camp to completing site inspections, the work always provided new learning opportunities. I went into this summer expecting to love the invasive work more than anything, but after taking on the role of camp counselor, I discovered something new about myself. While it is incredibly rewarding to directly impact a habitat through invasive species removal, I found that there is something special about educating others, especially the next generation, on the importance of protecting native habitats and the species within. It was a pleasure getting to know each of the campers, as well as the NICHES staff and supporters. Continuing on my career path, I hope to utilize my newly developed skills and stay connected with my new friends. I am so grateful for this experience!

- Reagan Muinzer



Mandela-Washington Fellowship

On June 15th, NICHES hosted a volunteer workday at our Granville Sand Barrens Preserve for members of the Mandela Washington Fellowship. The Fellowship is the flagship program of the U.S Government's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). The Fellows, between the ages of 25 and 35, are all accomplished leaders and have established records of promoting innovation and positive impact in their communities and countries. During the workday, Fellows had an opportunity to learn about the geological events that created the rare habitat and helped play an active role in its preservation by removing invasive species.

On July 2nd, NICHES was selected to host a follow-up engagement event for the members which included a hiking tour of Crow's Grove, a float on Big Pine Creek, and a meal prepared by the local community of NICHES supporters. During the event, NICHES friends and staff were able to share time, music, laughter, and stories of conservation success with the Fellows. In return, they described the natural areas that they cherished in their home countries and shared information about the environmental and agricultural initiatives that they were helping to lead there. Thank you to everyone who helps keep our preserves healthy and open for people around the globe to connect with and enjoy!





Honey Branch Bluffs: Donated by Kathleen Kitch, Dana Goodman, and Mike and Pam Murr.

Photograph by: Zac Cody



Summer Stewardship Update

This summer NICHES stewardship crew has been active across our entire service area completing funded projects and maintenance on our preserves and neighboring landowners' properties. We experienced tough conditions in the field with high heat and humidity but persevered to bring our mission forward with our full-time and seasonal stewards. As always, invasive removal took up the lion's share of staff effort. Droughty conditions made trail work lighter than in some years, but staff and volunteers worked together to keep things up as needed to provide access to the preserves.

Hand-pulling maintenance work in our prairies for species including sweet clover, common mullein, oxeye daisy, and Queen Anne's lace, were buoyed with volunteer effort through group workdays and individual initiatives of our dedicated volunteers with staff direction. Major infestations of sweet clover and field parsnip were controlled with mowing, utilizing our new sickle bar mower purchased with a grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette.

Early in the summer we followed up on top-killed invasive species with low volume foliar treatments in units where we conducted prescribed fire during the dormant season. Controlling species like multiflora rose in this way allows for spraying of compact individuals with healthy new growth using broadleaf specific herbicide which increases efficacy of the treatment. This approach greatly reduces the volume of herbicide needed to cover an infestation and limits collateral damage to desirable species.

Some foliar treatments were completed for funded projects at Mulvey Pond and Parker's Indian Creek Basin to reduce reed canary grass on those preserves as well as some work on Canada thistle, stilt grass, and Lespedeza cuneata at multiple properties.

The bulk of the work by stewardship staff over the summer was focused on cut-stump treatment of invasive shrubs. We cleared some thick infestations in projects funded by USFWS and NRCS in the edges surrounding the south restorations at Shawnee Bottoms and at Williams Woods. We also completed extensive follow-up maintenance on previously completed project areas. This stewardship practice addresses some of the most damaging species degrading our natural areas—amur honeysuckle and autumn olive—and does so in a way that minimizes the volume of herbicide used as well as off-target damage to native species. Major cut stump follow-up work was completed over 30 acres of our largest invasive removal project of 2021 at Whistler-Hare Woods, as well as over 50 acres of projects completed

over the last several years at Shawnee Bottoms. The highest goal of a good stewardship program is not just to kill all the targets, but rather to heal the natural communities with a thoughtful and integrated approach.

Staff also worked on completing annual site inspections for NICHES preserves, which are required to maintain our status as an accredited land trust through the Land Trust Alliance and help guide priority work across NICHES preserves. We used a different approach this summer with a four-person field crew in which properties were assigned to be inspected by a pair of stewards and then an inspection report with maps prepared; this was followed by a day of stewardship addressing the most appropriate task for that preserve. This allowed us to not only inspect, but also to impact smaller and less visited preserves along with making more significant impacts at our larger preserves.

Looking ahead to this fall, full-time staff will complete remaining site inspections for 2022 and wrap up cut stump work on a few smaller funded projects. We will utilize volunteers from our hunting crews to complete group workdays to clear fire breaks, clean up old dump sites on the preserves, and remove invasive species. As fall progresses, we will transition into some foliar treatment of short stature invasive shrubs that are more difficult to cut and treat as our native species go dormant for the season: another effective way to avoid collateral damage to native species. As we work through those tasks, we will also prepare fire breaks for the upcoming burn season and hopefully complete several prescribed fires in early November.

There are no slow seasons in the world of stewardship. When approached thoughtfully, each season prepares the preserves for the next, and progress is steady. When our work is done with care and with the health of the natural systems in mind, ecological recovery is possible.

-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter
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Waterways Exhibit

The Benton County Soil & Water Conservation District, NICHES partner in regional conservation, is partnering with the Otterbein Public Library and Indiana Humanities to sponsor Water/Ways, a Museum on Main Street traveling exhibit by the Smithsonian Institution of Traveling Exhibition Service.

Our world is made of water, and so are we. Water/Ways, an exhibition from Museum on Main Street, takes a deep look at this essential component of life on our planet, which powers the environment's engine, impacts climate and helps shape and sculpt the landscape. Humans and animals rely on water for health, hydration, food supplies, and hygiene. A major component of NICHES' stewardship mission is protecting land along local creeks and rivers. By protecting these riparian ecosystems, we are simultaneously providing habitat for native plants and animals and a buffer zone to help mitigate erosion and runoff from nearby agricultural fields.

Water's impact on humans is much more than just biological and environmental. Water is an important element in American culture. We are attracted to water as a source of peace and contemplation. Water carves out a place in our memories of where we live and play. We cherish our connections to nature, particularly the sights, the sounds, and the sense of place we feel at the water's edge. Many faiths revere water as a sacred symbol. Authors and artists are inspired by the duality of water—a substance so seemingly soft and graceful that is also such a powerful and nearly unstoppable force.

Are you interested in helping with this exhibit? Exhibit Docents are needed to sit with the exhibit and share this valuable story with patrons. Sign up to be an exhibit docent at bit.ly/WayerWaysDocent. Stay tuned for details on the Fall Exhibit in NICHES Website and E-newsletter!



NICHES is Re-Accredited

In mid-August NICHES heard from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission that our application for re-accreditation was approved! Only organizations meeting the highest standards of excellence and conservation permanence are awarded this special designation.

Accreditation is a voluntary process. The standards and application process are rigorous and many land trusts, especially smaller ones without staff, choose not to go through the process. About 1/3 of land trusts in the nation's Land Trust Alliance are accredited.

NICHES was first accredited in 2017 and we must reapply every 5 years. The re-application process was meticulous and lasted nearly a year. We submitted our application in autumn 2021 with over 150 documents that detail our responsible governance, sound finances, ethical conduct and transactions, and lasting stewardship. The commission always sends an "Additional Information Request" (AIR) after application review to gather more details on specific projects unique to each agency so they can make an informed final decision. The commission reviewed and returned their AIR to NICHES at the end of February 2022. We gathered more documentation and completed the AIR in early June.

We are very pleased to be awarded this designation from an objective outsider. The accreditation process strengthens our policies and programs and builds resiliency and sustainability as an organization. We learn new ways to strengthen our accountability and transparency. With your support, we uphold these standards of conservation excellence and ensure the best possible protection of West Central Indiana flora and fauna.

ACCREDITATION AFFIRMS

- Sound Finances
- Ethical Conduct
- Responsible Governance
- Lasting Stewardship



Volunteer Highlight

During the summer months, a portion of NICHES student help and regular weekend volunteer base dissipates. This cyclical drop in volunteering is largely due to vacation travels and students being gone for the summer. In order to bridge this important gap in the stewardship calendar, NICHES relies on corporate and organizational workdays. Support from these local groups and businesses, paired with assistance from a team of seasonal stewards, allows NICHES to maintain our ambitious schedule of growing-season projects across our full service range. Below are some highlights of recent group volunteer events that NICHES has hosted over the summer months.

On July 5th and July 19th, young leaders from YMCA Camp Tecumseh CILT's program helped clear Queen Anne's lace from our Spring Creek Sanctuary Preserve in White County (not currently open to the public). This is the second year CILT's volunteers have helped maintain this invasive species control project.



On July 27 NICHES worked with a team of employees from Wabash - "One Wabash" in Lafayette to pull sweet clover at our Granville Sand Barrens preserve in Tippecanoe County.

On July 29, over 50 members of the Seeger Football Program helped cut in a new trail along Big Pine Creek in Warren County.



On August 23rd and September 13 NICHES partnered with employees from Bob Rohrman Subaru to remove common mullein and honeysuckle from our Roy Whistler Wildlife Area Preserve in Tippecanoe County.

On August 30th volunteers from Cook Biotech gathered at Granville Sand Barrens to pull Queen Anne's Lace from our prairie restoration. This is the fourth consecutive year Cook volunteers have come out to help maintain projects at this site!



If you have a group or business that would like to set up a volunteer event with NICHES Land trust, please email sam@nicheslandtrust.org

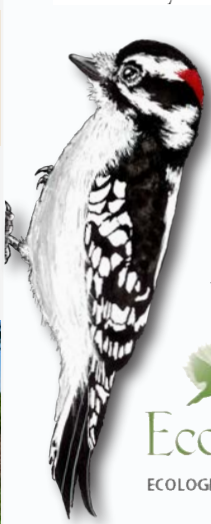
A Community of Support

Over the last 14 years, through the Subaru Share the Love Event, Subaru of America Inc. and its participating retailers have donated more than \$227 million to charity, with customers choosing between four national charities and over 1,700 hometown charities. Between November 16th and January 1st, 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!



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For more information on sponsorships, contact Silenze Esquivel-Benjamin at silenze@nicheslandtrust.org or call 765-423-1605.

NICHES Land Trust is seeking Pumpkin Picassos and Gourd van Goghs to carve and donate jack-o-lanterns for our third annual Jack-o-Lantern Hike at Clegg Memorial Garden in Lafayette. This is a 100% community-sustained event that features almost a mile of locally carved squash art. Enjoy a non-scary stroll along a path lit with Jack-O-Lanterns on Oct 28th and 29th. The trail is a self-guided loop on rugged terrain with steps and hills; please wear sturdy shoes and bring a handheld flashlight. Due to limited parking, we will have groups of 20 hikers or less begin their hike every 15 minutes from 7-10 p.m.

The event is free to all NICHES members (and their families), \$5/hiker for non-members, and free to all registered pumpkin carvers. Please visit our online calendar at nicheslandtrust.org for information on how to donate a jack-o-lantern and register to hike!



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