



THE SPROUT

NICHES LAND TRUST | SPRING 2022 | VOLUME 26 ISSUE 1

Looking Back at 2021 | Back to my Roots | The Journey Beyond Invasive Species

Cover Painting "Skunk Cabbage Bloom at Crows Grove" By: Gabriela Sincich

"Spring is proof that there is beauty in new beginnings" - Matshona Dhliwayo

Executive Director Update

Greeting NICHES Land Trust Members! I am thrilled to serve this community as NICHES' Executive Director. I have had the pleasure of connecting with many NICHES members over the years, and I look forward to getting to know more of you through this role. For my first *Sprout* letter, I would like to share a bit about my background and connection to NICHES.

I have been a NICHES member, volunteer, and community partner for the last five years. My close connection to the organization is helping as we adjust to many changes and continue our tremendous growth as an agency. I grew up on the Des Plaines and Fox Rivers in Illinois and attended the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) for my bachelor's degree. I studied Integrative Biology and Psychology, conducted research on the visual ecology of freshwater fish, and worked as a program adviser in my living learning community. Two life-shaping experiences during my time at UIUC were immersive field ecology trips to the Missouri Ozarks and Southern Georgia/Northern Florida. I gained valuable experience learning to read a landscape and connecting to organizations focused on ecosystem restoration. I learned about the Indigenous practice of prescribed fire, how most ecosystems are dependent on this process, and how important it is that prescribed fire is part of habitat restoration. The desire to study prescribed fire to restore habitats burned within me, so I pursued every opportunity I could to learn more.

After graduation I worked as a naturalist at an urban nature center outside Chicago. I led hikes through restored prairies, taught classes, and coordinated summer nature camps. Later I was accepted into a graduate program in Purdue's Forestry and Natural Resources Department. My master's thesis focused on the use of prescribed fire for oak woodland restoration in Indiana. I received my wildland firefighting certification and was eager to use this training as much as possible to help local ecosystems thrive. Thankfully, I connected to NICHES' prescribed fire crew! During my first non-fire volunteer day, Stewardship Director Bob Easter shared the impressive management activities ongoing at Granville Sand Barrens. We hopped into his truck to pick up royal catchfly (*Silene regia*) from a member's home greenhouse and Bob Dylan played through the speakers. I knew then that NICHES was the community for me. I was impressed by NICHES' active membership base and its commitment to high-quality stewardship in magnificent habitats. I believe there is so much power in a NICHES being a member-based organization, and so much beauty in people coming together to decide our future as it relates to natural habitats.

It is an honor, a privilege, and a responsibility to steward these habitats. NICHES is doing some of the most important and rewarding work that we can for the Earth.

My growing love for the Wabash River connected me with the Wabash River Enhancement Corporation (WREC), another environmental non-profit based in Lafayette. After graduating from Purdue, I worked at WREC as the watershed coordinator for the Region of the Great Bend of the Wabash River. This reach of the Wabash extends from Battle Ground to Attica. Rivers connect us in the most wonderful ways. I grew to know so much more of this community and the folks dedicated to improving conditions in the Wabash River and quality of life in the region. I led an education and outreach program on how we can all help improve water quality in the Wabash River. I coordinated a grant program for farmers and folks in urban areas to implement practices that help the Wabash and restore natural processes. It brings me such joy to connect with people dedicated to stewarding this community treasure. Since moving to Lafayette in 2015, I have deeply connected myself to this watershed and committed myself to this regional community.

I am filled with gratitude to the founders of NICHES, for all the labor and gifts shared by our members, and to be here with you all on this journey together. NICHES staff are continuing their strong commitment to high quality stewardship and completing innovative projects for natural areas. We have a very exciting year ahead and are well positioned for tremendous growth. Together, we will meet our mission of 8,000 protected acres by 2030 and create habitat that is equitable and accessible for all, from microorganisms in the soil to birds flying in clear skies and all layers in between.



-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis
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Looking back at 2021

A month to month recap of stewardship, volunteering, and outreach highlights.

January: The 2021 volunteer season kicked off on MLK Day with two separate brush stacking workdays at Granville Sand Barrens and Holley Savanna. Forty-one volunteers worked across back-to-back shifts to prepare both sites for follow-up stewardship work later in the season.



February: NICHES partnered with the USFWS and 6 property neighbors to conduct a large scale invasive shrub thicket removal project at Whistler-Hare Woods. The project area was 180 acres in scope and represents a major accomplishment in moving our ecological impacts beyond our own borders.

March: NICHES partnered with Camp Tecumseh to host a 9-person Americorps team. Team members helped us conduct our prescribed fire season, plant trees, remove invasives, and build trails. The team collectively contributed over 1,000 volunteer hours to the organization over a 4-week project period.



April: Parker's Hickory Grove Farm was officially opened to the public with celebrations of music, poetry, and a performance from the Greater Lafayette Dance Collective. The new preserve, located in West Lafayette, is only 2 miles west from Purdue

May: War of the Weeds volunteers rallied again to pull invasive garlic mustard plants across our service range. Over 300 pulling shifts (900+ hours) were filled to help give relief to our native spring wildflowers, marking our largest removal effort to date.



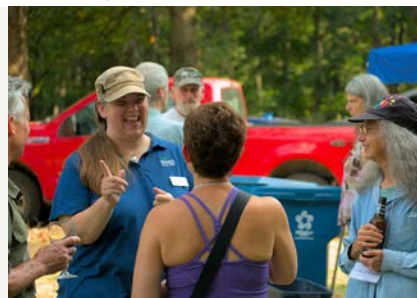
June: NICHES hosted its largest summer camp program ever! Over 3 weeks, 33 campers took to the woods and creeks to enjoy some time nature hiking, swimming, climbing, and exploring.

July: NICHES worked with three seasonal interns--Jordan Young, Shannon Felger, and Jackson Stoll--as well as seasonal employee Zach Neff to tackle several important stewardship projects across our service range. Interns worked together to help control stiltgrass, sweet clover, honeysuckle, and Canada thistle.



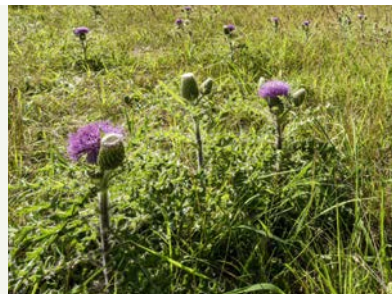
August: Volunteers removed trash from 3 local waterways as part of our annual creek clean-up program. This year we were able to collectively clean-up up over 12 miles of aquatic habitat. Thank you volunteers for helping leave our cherished local waterways litter free!

September: NICHES supporters gathered at Parker's Hickory Grove Farm for our annual Black Rock Society Meeting. This year's event was held outside to accommodate for the continuing Covid-19 pandemic and featured organizational updates from staff members and after-dinner hikes of the property's new trail.




October: 186 local pumpkin carvers donated their time and creativity for our 2nd annual Clegg Pumpkin Hike. Over 400 people registered for the hike, making it the most attended event in our organization's history! The pumpkins were placed along the new Duke Upland Trail that was recently constructed by our Clegg Trail Crew.

November: NICHES Stewardship Director Bob Easter planted Hill's Thistle at our Granville Sand Barrens Preserve in Tippecanoe County. This unique species is perhaps one of the most endangered in the state, and the Indiana Native Plant Conservation Alliance lists the Hill's Thistle as its focal species for our region.



December: Rainy weather and a late fall pushed our burn season into December. Stewards from ACRES Land Trust joined for a prescribed fire at Shawnee Bottoms to help inform their organizations burn program.

2022 Board Slate

 **Mark Your Calendars:** Join us on **April 30th at 4 pm.** for our Annual Meeting! The meeting will take place at Martell Forest (County Rd 100 N, West Lafayette, IN). Check our website for further event details. Limited hikes will be hosted by NICHES friends and staff.



Vanessa Pacheco

Vanessa is the Assistant Director for Wellness Programs at Purdue University, where she supports students in becoming active participants in their own well-being. Vanessa earned her M.S.Ed. in Higher Education and Student Affairs in 2015 from Indiana University before embracing Lafayette as her home. As the co-founder and organizer of the ACE Campus Food Pantry at Purdue, and as a director for both the Indiana Task Force and the Greater Lafayette Legal Defense Fund, she traditionally works with teams to set plans for working with media, running educational programs, and managing intra-group relationships.

Liz is an Associate Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Habitat Management at Purdue University. Her research investigates wildlife associations with habitat and, specifically, responses to habitat fragmentation. Liz is equally passionate about teaching and mentoring students. She embeds career and professional skill development into her courses while also finding engaging and active ways to teach course content. She hopes to increase her (and her students') involvement with NICHES in the future and brings ideas for public outreach activities and partnerships.



Dr. Elizabeth Flaherty



Dr. Kent Walters

Kent is a native Hoosier whose love of nature led him to earn his PhD in physiology, studying Alaskan beetles at the University of Notre Dame. Currently Kent, his husband, and his three sons live on a 4th-generation family farm in Warren County. Here Kent discovered his love for land management as he worked to ecologically restore two acres of pasture next to his home. He has become an advocate for native plant communities and has helped lead a prairie restoration project with NICHES at Cicott Park.

Lori is a scientist at Corteva Agriscience in Indianapolis. She discovered NICHES at an orange-fringed orchid hike in 2019. A couple months later, she became a NICHES volunteer and left feeling moved to support the organization and its causes. She has become a familiar face at volunteer workdays and continues to be a regular donor. As a board candidate, Lori envisions herself serving as an advocate for volunteering and community engagement as well as helping with fundraising ideas and initiatives.

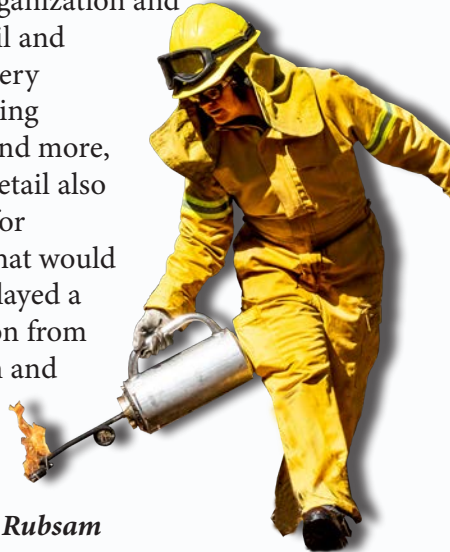


Lori Marcum

Thank You, Brett!

As Brett and I end our time with NICHES Land Trust, I am honored to share some final words to shine a light on the significant role Brett served for NICHES and to wish her well as she begins her new position at Purdue. There are few people who really understood the depth of what Brett did for NICHES. As the Administrative Manager, Brett was often the first person people engaged with when reaching out to NICHES. She was the voice offering guidance and information to individuals interested in the organization and its events and programs. Her attention to detail and grammatical knowledge, meant that almost every communication from the organization, including letters, grants, newsletters, proposals, flyers, and more, passed in front of her eyes. This attention to detail also allowed Brett to serve a critical financial role for NICHES, expanding her duties far beyond what would be considered typical for her position. Brett played a part in making every aspect of the organization from outreach and development to land acquisition and stewardship run smoothly. Thank you, Brett, for always going above and beyond. NICHES is better today because of your efforts.

-Former NICHES Development Director, Julie Rubsam



(Photo Credit: Chad Phelps) In addition to being a masterfull Administrative Manager, Brett also helped assist stewardship staff in conducting prescribed fires.

Have you been outdoors recently? I have. It's what brings me peace and makes me calm. It's where I admire nature, both flora and fauna. I love the sounds and smells of nature (well, maybe not ALL the smells), and enjoy imagining the experience of the many living things around me. I want that experience to be available, not just for me, but for my friends, my children, their children, and so on. It's on us to make decisions today to provide for those many people's tomorrows.

It's that realization, about our actions today, that motivates me to be a donor to NICHES. I've decided that making a gift from my estate will help NICHES deliver on their long term goal of protecting and stewarding high quality habitats locally. I've been a member and volunteer for several years, and while I know my current participation makes a difference, I believe the commitment I have made in my estate will make an even bigger impact.

-NICHES Board Member, Denise Laussade



Sunlight shines through ice covered branches at Mulvey Pond. *Photograph by: Chad Phelps.*



Starting a New Chapter

As we look forward to a new era at NICHES Land Trust under the leadership of our new Executive Director, Shannon Stanis, we want to take this opportunity to give thanks to another departing staff member, Julie Rubsam. Julie served NICHES for over six years as our Deputy Director, helping to support staff, increase NICHES membership, and build relationships with donors. In 2021, she capably filled the role of Interim Executive Director: a time in which I worked closely with her on several major projects. Julie was committed to helping the stewardship program deliver on our commitments and would regularly check in with stewardship staff to inquire about equipment needs. Julie worked diligently to acquire funding for planned projects rather than chasing dollars tied to less-than-ideal projects simply because they would bring the organization funding. She was successful in securing many grants for items like a Polaris Ranger, DR brush mowers, and trucks for stewardship staff. The majority of the equipment NICHES' staff use today was secured by Julie through these types of grant proposals.

Even now as she serves HeadWaters Land Conservancy in Michigan as their Executive Director, we still have three crucial pieces of equipment coming our way from grants she secured while Interim Executive Director. Those items include a Kubota RTV, a 100-gallon spray rig, and a new sickle bar mower, all of which were specifically chosen by stewardship staff as our most pressing equipment needs.

Julie did so many things for NICHES in the time she was on staff including organizing annual events, nurturing relationships with donors and partners, and generally supporting the staff as a great team member. Julie and her husband Jason had been planning for a move over the last few years as their son, Ash, nears the end of his high school career. We will miss having Julie on the team. We hope that you will join us in thanking her for her service to the organization and in wishing the Rubsam family well in their next chapter.

-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter



Back to my Roots

After joining the NICHES team in 2018, I knew I wanted to use my developing stewardship skillset to help improve the ecological health of my childhood community, the city of Attica. In 2019, I approached the Attica Park board with a management plan for Ravine Park and Arms Woods, a 70-acre site with an impressive oak woodland and a high potential for native plant regeneration. These two parks have been owned and protected by the city of Attica since the early 1900s. Protecting both sites from development has allowed the bulk of the resident plant and animal community to remain intact. However, these two parks are now being threatened by invasive species and maple tree encroachment.

After being asked to join the Attica Park Board in 2021, I reinvigorated the idea of completing stewardship in the park. The board agreed and found that NICHES would be the best organization to complete this work based on our presence in the area and dedication to high quality stewardship. This work will be funded through a \$10,000 grant from the Attica Community Foundation.

Over the past couple of months our part-time steward, Zach Neff, and I have been working in the Arms Woods section of the park to thin over-abundant sugar maples. Fortunately this section already has low levels of invasive species and only needs more light getting through the dense maple-dominated canopy. This area is also where we hope to complete a prescribed fire in coming years to further spur understory regeneration. As we worked our way through the property, we were greeted with putty root orchids, oak trees, and bald eagles flying overhead. During the growing season, we will move to the Ravine Park section of the preserve and begin removing honeysuckle and burning bush. Overall, this new project has been a long time in the making, but it is exciting to play a role in the ecological recovery of a preserve central to my hometown. I encourage everyone to make it out to the park to enjoy the trail system and check out the work that is underway!

-NICHES Land Steward, Justin Harmeson



Old oaks growing at Arms Woods

The Journey Beyond Invasive Species

The Black Rock Barrens area is a prime example of NICHES' journey through landscape-level ecosystem recovery. The journey started with invasive removal on NICHES preserves and expansion of that work to neighboring properties. It continued with establishing prescribed fire, implementing a deer reduction program, and thinning shade-tolerant trees. Now we are beginning to focus our efforts on overall reduction in canopy in specific areas. In 2021, NICHES completed two prescribed burns in the Black Rock Barrens area, covering 148 acres. Following the second burn, we returned to couple some thinning work with the fire. This 'double disturbance' has been shown to produce dramatic results in the recovery of target species. We spent about a week in December, following the burn, thinning the remaining maple and beech trees on the siltstone slopes to help sunlight reach the understory in the spring.

In order to recover populations of target species, including white pine, we also need to be working on reducing the overall canopy which is dominated by shagbark hickory and black oak in and around the barrens' habitats. We wrote a proposal to the Division of Nature Preserves to confirm their support for this next level of management, and approval was granted.

We planned the removal of about 350 tightly spaced black oaks from a recoverable acre or so of siltstone barrens where we can expect to get natural regeneration of white pine. We spent a day cutting and lopping the trees in January, and we followed that with a volunteer workday to pile the slash outside of the project area. The stumps were then cut low and treated on the first dry day in the low 50s.

Invasive removal, prescribed fire, and deer management will remain important ongoing programs for these preserves, and, along with canopy reduction, we can expect healthy herbaceous layers, wildlife populations, and more regeneration of white pine and white oak on the horizon. Healthy balanced systems are the best protection against destruction by invasive species and there are many roads to follow on the journey.

Siltstone barren black oak thinning progression



BEFORE



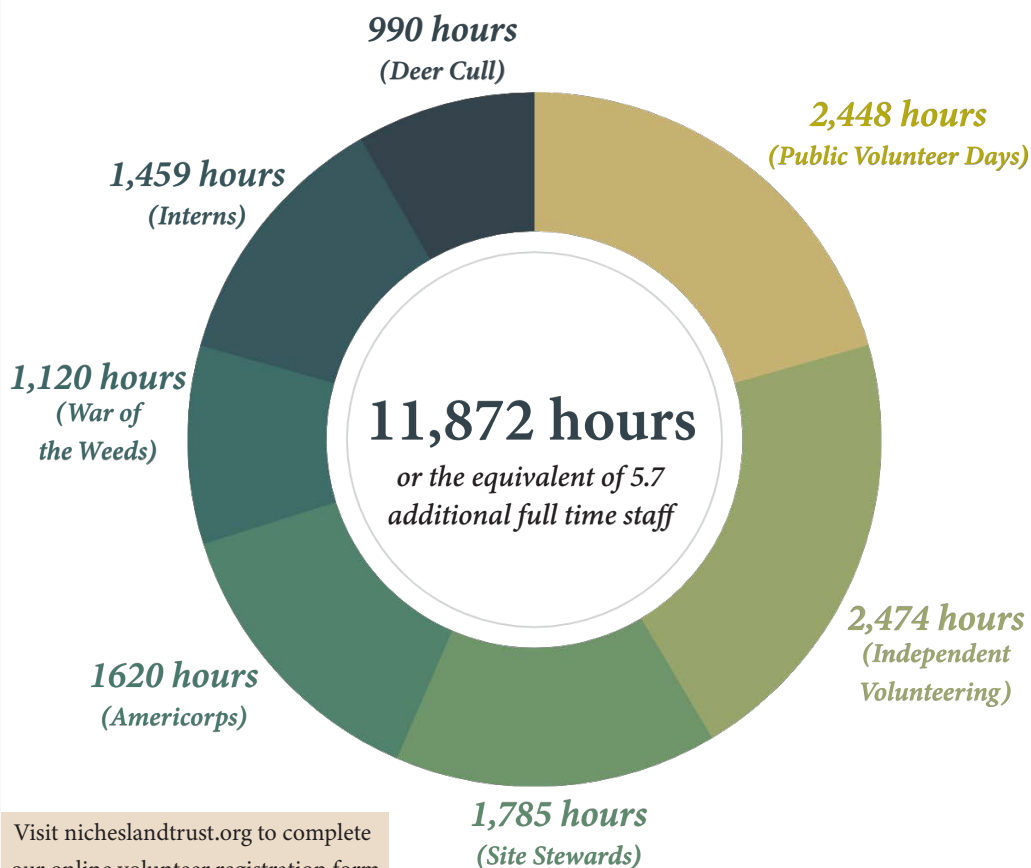
DURING



AFTER

Thank You, Volunteers!

In 1995 NICHES began as a fully volunteer-led organization. Fast forward 27 years and NICHES now benefits from a strong team of full-time staff members. However, volunteers are still a critical part of our success at every step. In 2021 NICHES broke another milestone in volunteer engagement and for the first time ever exceeded 10,000 hours of annual volunteer support! From public workdays that provide stewardship assistance where it's needed most, to independent volunteers and site stewards who maintain the ecosystem health and accessibility of our preserves behind the scenes, we couldn't be more grateful to the many actors who make everything we do possible. As our organization continues to deepen our impacts and grow through the decades, we know we are doing so with a strong and committed foundation of community support. We are excited to continue pursuing our dedication to high-quality stewardship work with all of our volunteers in 2022 and the many new faces this year will bring.



2022 Volunteer of the Year

Each year NICHES selects an individual who has contributed significantly to the stewardship and outreach goals of the organization to be honored as our Volunteer of the Year. We are excited to announce that the Volunteer of the Year for 2021 is Deborah Kull! From attending almost ten War of the Weeds shifts in the spring, to helping move over 180 pumpkins for our Clegg Jack-o-Lantern

Hike in the fall, Deborah has been a familiar face year-round. In addition to slaying invasive species, Deborah is also an accomplished dancer and organized a performance with the Greater Lafayette Dance Collective to commemorate the opening of our Parkers Hickory Grove Farm preserve in April. Working alongside Deborah in the field, her genuine excitement and love for the natural world clearly shines through and infects those around her. It's been an honor to share time and stories with Deborah in the woods, on the water, and across many of the acres we work to protect. Join us at our upcoming annual meeting to help thank Deborah for the incredible time, spirit, and passion she has brought to the NICHES community. Thank you, Deborah, from all of us at NICHES, and we can't wait to continue working with you for a greener future in 2022!



You Help us Reach our Goals!

NICHES will be expanding its 2022 stewardship tool belt thanks to grants from SIA and the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette. SIA has helped us secure an RTVX-900 Kubota utility vehicle, and the Community Foundation has helped us secure a new spray rig and sickle bar mower attachment.



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For more information on sponsorships, contact our Executive Director, Shannon Stanis at shannon@nicheslandtrust.org or call 765-423-1605.

The NICHES Bylaws, under Article VI: Committees, Sections 1 and 2, identifies the Executive Committee and Governance Committee as being permanent standing committees within the corporation. Section 3, Other Committees simply states that other committees may be created at the will of the Board, but none are called out by name. The Board believes the Finance Committee should be a permanent standing committee, due to its strategic importance in oversight of the financial well being of NICHES. Therefore, the Board has approved and is recommending that the following amendment be voted upon by the membership at our annual meeting:

Section 3. Finance Committee

The Finance Committee shall be a standing committee of directors and non-directors responsible to: review the preliminary monthly financial reports and annual proposed budget; administer the annual distribution from endowments; recommend contributions to reserves and board restricted funds in the endowments; and provide guidance for separation of duties and application of controls. Following the annual audit, the Finance Committee shall meet with auditors to receive the audit of the Corporation. The Treasurer shall serve as the chairman of this committee. The committee will meet no less frequently than the board regularly meets, as practicable, to submit any reports and motions to the board and to address other relevant financial matters.



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