

A watercolor illustration of a river otter standing on a rocky bank, looking towards a waterfall in the distance. The scene is set in a forest with autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and purple. The otter is brown with a lighter patch on its chest. The waterfall is a small cascade of white water over a rocky ledge. The overall style is soft and painterly.

THE SPROUT

NICHES LAND TRUST | WINTER 2022 | VOLUME 26 ISSUE 4

Black Magic Forest | Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East | Fall Creek Gorge

Cover art by: Gabriela Sincich

"Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell and organize." -Jim Jontz

Executive Director Update

A very happy winter solstice and holiday season to you all! We hope you think of NICHES as you make your winter plans, from year end giving to snow filled hikes and nature exploration.

Inside this Sprout edition we have stories of 3 new acquisitions that demonstrate the power and beauty of our community effort to protect nature. These stories demonstrate what is possible when we come together to protect the land. We hope these stories inspire you.

One of these acquisitions is the transfer of Fall Creek Gorge in Warren County from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to NICHES. This Sprout shares the story of NICHES' growing presence in the Big Pine Valley along with the strong community efforts given to improving Fall Creek Gorge over the past year. As many of you know, TNC made the difficult decision to close this beloved State Dedicated Nature Preserve in 2020 due to overuse and abuse. NICHES plans to re-open Fall Creek Gorge in summer 2023 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the preserve's protection. We are so grateful to our volunteers, community partners, and private donors that have made this possible.

NICHES is committed to caring for these special natural areas in perpetuity and committed to strong financial practices that provide long term sustainability. As part of our accreditation standards and nonprofit best practices, NICHES undergoes a voluntary annual financial audit by an external accounting agency. The pandemic delayed and stretched our 2020 audit timeline, but it is complete, and we had a clean audit. The 2021 audit is wrapping up and will be complete by January. The auditors check our internal procedures, control practices, and bookkeeping. A clean audit means our financial statements and activities follow the generally accepted accounting principles and guidelines. The annual audit and accreditation status demonstrates that NICHES appropriately manages our finances and makes wise use of our donations to implement our mission.

Our governance, stewardship, and outreach are rooted in community partnerships and relationship building. While NICHES has a fantastic staff that can focus efforts on these important projects, it is truly all our members that make this critical work possible. Thanks to our members, donations, volunteer time and talent, hard work, and organization, NICHES now protects 4,320 acres in our service area!

Please consider making an end of year gift to support NICHES so we can continue this critical work and make big things happen for local natural areas. When passionate people come together to protect nature, anything is possible.

-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis
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Black Magic Forest

It was a colorful day in the fall of 1984 when Tom Eismin and his former wife Sandy were searching for wooded a lot where they could build their dream house. As luck would have it, Herb and Dortha Parker were on an evening walk adjacent to their property on 400 West and met the Eismin couple. Herb recalled a property adjacent to theirs had been for sale several years ago and might still be available. The 14 acres of wooded ravines was soon purchased by the Eismin family and construction began the following summer. Tom Eismin along with a limited crew and help from family and friends carved a niche in the forest with a lovely home, a pond and yard where swimming, ice skating and socializing would take place over the next few decades.

As neighbors, the Parkers and Tom quickly became friends. After the passing of Herb, Dortha and Tom became especially close; he helped maintain her property and they visited often. In April, 2020 Dortha passed away and Tom, along with the Parker's children, began to discuss the possibility of a NICHES donation of the Parker land (currently called Parker's Hickory Grove Farm). Tom, Nona Schaler, his life partner, along with his children Kirstin and Ryan discussed a subsequent donation of an additional 4 acres. The decision was easy: help preserve the land through a gift to NICHES. The Eismin family donation connects to the southeast corner of Hickory Grove Farms, adding deep ravines, a small creek, and additional hiking trails through a mature hardwood forest.

Tom has recently retired from a career as a professor of aviation at Purdue University. Professor Eismin is an enthusiastic outdoorsman who enjoys a connection with nature in various ways. His love of aviation, open air, and blue skies eventually brought him to obtain a Hot Air Balloon Pilot's rating. His first balloon was named Black Magic. His family and friends launched the balloon from their property hundreds of times. Even Dortha Parker enjoyed a ride in Black Magic. So, when it became time to choose a name for the Eismin land donation, Black Magic Forest became the natural choice.

Tom, Nona, Kirstin, and Ryan are all glad to have donated Black Magic Forest to the collection of NICHES properties. Please come walk the woods and enjoy nature here in one of the newly acquired NICHES properties, Black Magic Forest.



Tom, Nona, Mike and Liz on the new bridge in Black Magic Forest. (From left to Right: Nona Schaler, Tom Eismin, Liz & Mike Holmes.)

Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East

NICHES recently added a new property to our portfolio in Tippecanoe County: the Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East. We are thrilled to detail here our plan for restoration work at the preserve, which is nearly through the planning phase. This nearly 200-acre parcel is significant, not just because of its size and its 1.2 miles of Wabash River frontage, but also because of its location. This new property connects NICHES Roy Whistler Wildlife Area and Granville Sand Barrens State Dedicated Nature Preserve to the Wabash River creating a 279-acre complex. This large block of protected acreage is connected by the Wabash River to Ross Hills and Ross Biological Reserve as well as the Wabash River Enhancement Corporation's Fen-of-the-Great-Bend property. NICHES has done extensive invasive control and other management on these properties over the last decade.

The property has been enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easement program through the USDA by the former owners and then sold to NICHES at a discounted price. The 140 acres of previously farmed ground is now permanently protected from being farmed and will be restored to native grassland to complement the roughly 60 acres of mature woodland. We chose to restore prairie habitat for a couple of reasons. The first is because the Granville and Roy Whistler properties are dominated by prairie and sand barrens, and the sand formations extend to cover 30 acres of the new parcel. The second reason is that recently DNR herpetologists discovered a breeding population of the state endangered plains leopard frog on NICHES property bordering the new addition. The site will get two separate seed mixes: one for the sandy substrate (30 acres) and one for the alluvium soils (110 acres). The initial seed mixes contain a total of 70 species.

This project will be accomplished with the help of many partners. We will take advantage of funding through the USDA for initial restoration costs, including separate pools of money for invasive brush control, site preparation including spraying and mowing as needed to ready the site to accept seed, and, finally, funding for native seed mixes and drilling of the mixes by a contractor.

NICHES is fortunate to have a dedicated volunteer site steward who lives next to the property. This volunteer steward already helps to maintain fire breaks and trails at Granville and Roy Whistler and leads the deer cull for those properties among other tasks. The volunteer hunting crew is active in helping complete stewardship work in the area and will continue to be involved on the new parcel. In fact, the hunting volunteers have already spent multiple days mowing access paths to facilitate assessment of the site for planning and access to begin restoration work.

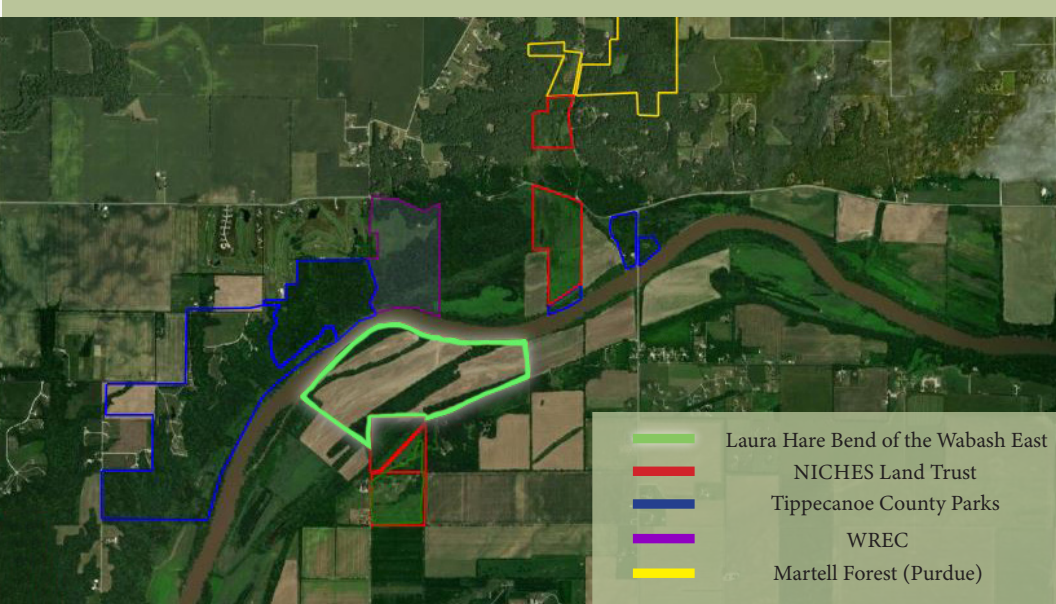
NICHES will hire Ecologic LLC to complete Fecon mowing of thick invasive shrubs over 11+ acres during January of 2023. Our friends and neighbors at Arbor America will follow up what Ecologic cannot finish within the budget with 5 free days of Fecon mowing that they donate to NICHES annually. In the spring

and summer of 2023, NICHES staff will begin spraying the resprouts from the Fecon mowing and working on cut-stump treatment in other areas of the preserve. Around this time, Ecologic will return to work on spraying out reed canary grass and Japanese hops on the perimeters of the fields. Over the summer NICHES staff will work on basal bark treatment of invasive white mulberry around the perimeters of the wooded acres. Toward the end of summer, we will have the entire 140 acres of former row crops mowed and follow up spray any target species within the restoration areas before final preparation for drilling with mowing and/or prescribed fire to clear the fields of debris.

Along the way we will utilize staff and volunteers for tasks that arise outside of the scope of the initial planned activities. Once the prairie habitats are established, we will maintain them with prescribed fire and continue maintenance for invasive species and habitat improvement in perpetuity.

NICHES is so very appreciative of all the parties that make this work possible for us to complete: including the Laura Hare Charitable Trust, McAllister Foundation, Roy Whistler Foundation, and Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette for funding this acquisition; NICHES staff and board of directors; the family that agreed to sell us the acres and navigated the WRE program to make the sale possible; the dedicated USDA employees that have helped us through the process; our wonderful site steward and volunteer hunting crew; Arbor America for donating work annually in the area; Ecologic LLC for always stepping up to do great work on our projects; DNR herpetologists who discovered the state endangered plains leopard frog breeding population that helped inform management; and, of course, all of NICHES members, donors, and supporters of all types that make everything we do possible.

-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter
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Fall Creek Gorge

Fall Creek Gorge, colloquially referred to as “The Potholes,” is one of Warren County’s premiere sites of scenic inspiration and ecological importance. The preserve has long been celebrated as a local natural treasure due to the striking hydrological features carved into its sandstone bedrock foundation. This layer of sandstone was laid down over 300 million years ago as our region transitioned from a shallow sea to a terrestrial landscape. Evidence of life during this early carboniferous period has been recorded on the preserve in the form of fossilized tetrapod and early reptile footprints. Over millennia, water flowing over this sandstone formation has carved out a steep winding canyon with a series of deep kettle holes. The vortices created at the base of each kettle churn small stones and sediment which act as a geomorphic drill-bit to sculpt the soft sandstone below, creating the iconic ‘potholes.’ The high and moist sandstone canyon walls provide a unique habitat for a variety of sensitive vascular and bryophytic plants to thrive. For as long as history has been recorded, people have been traveling to this cherished spot to take in the sights and escape the Midwest summer heat in the cool forested canyon. Its reputation as an exceptional natural attraction made it a popular tourist destination in the early 1900’s, commonly drawing visitors from the nearby historic Mudlavia Hotel.

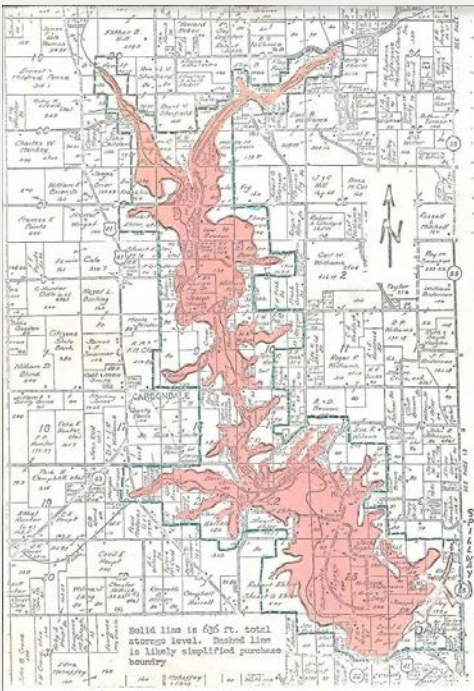


COLLETTOSAURUS INDIANAENSIS, NOV. SP.
Collettt, 1873

Tetrapod fossil (*Collettosaurus Indianensis*) collected at Fall Creek Gorge by John Collett in 1873



A group outing to Fall Creek Gorge in the Late 1800's.



Projected area of the Big Pine Dam Project

In October 1965, Congress authorized the Corps of Engineers to build an earth and rockfill dam on Big Pine Creek in Warren County, Indiana. The reservoir and lake were projected to cover more than 6,000 acres of land in and around the Big Pine Valley. The reservoir was to help control flooding along the Wabash River, as well as to provide recreational benefits and economic growth to the surrounding area through tourism and increased residential land values. The Big Pine Creek Dam was opposed locally by a ratio of 10:1 and the debate around the project launched the political career of 22-year-old conservationist Jim Jontz, who won the Indiana state representative seat by two votes. In an effort to protect one of the highest quality portions of the projected

lake site from destruction, the Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve was created in 1973 by The Nature Conservancy. The Conservancy hired Jontz, who was a direct neighbor to the preserve, to serve as the caretaker and program director for the property. With continued pressure from Jontz and activist groups like the Friends of Big Pine Creek and the Committee on Big Pine Creek, the dam project was eventually abandoned in 1990.

Initial management of Fall Creek Gorge focused primarily on fostering the preserve's population of state-endangered forked asters, and on mitigating abuse from the site's many annual visitors. For nearly 50 years, The Nature Conservancy has taken great care to preserve this botanical treasure and safeguard the glacial relicts and endemic plant species that grow within its borders.

In 2014 NICHES joined the conservation legacy of the Big Pine Creek Valley when 'Rhus Radicans,' a 20-acre tract which includes a small section of Big Pine Creek frontage, came to us through a generous donation from Jim Ahlrich and NICHES volunteer board member Bill McFee. Rhus Radicans is situated 9 miles upstream of Fall Creek Gorge.



Often dressed in his trademark blue-jean overalls, Jim Jontz was one of the leaders in the fight against the Big Pine Creek dam.



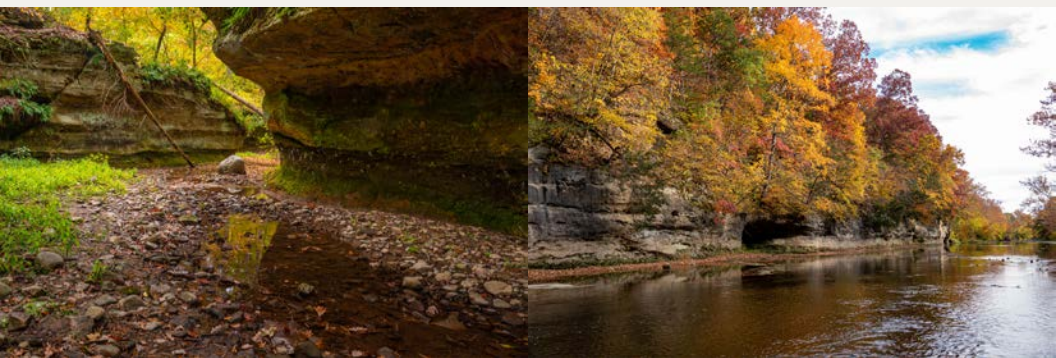
“The Potholes” of Fall Creek Gorge: Transferred to NICHES Land Trust in October 2021

Photograph by: Chad Phelps



This local footprint expanded in 2015, when Martha ‘Crow’ Pugh left NICHES 33 acres of beautiful oak and white pine woodland in her estate plan; she named the site Crow’s Grove in honor of her family’s local history. Similar to Fall Creek Gorge, Crow’s Grove features a winding sandstone gorge flanked with towering glacial relict white pine trees. Martha had become close with her neighbors, Kathleen Kitch and Dana Goodman, after a group of friends they are a part of, known as Warren Piece, worked together to purchase from Martha just under 100 acres of land adjacent to Crow’s Grove back in 2002 to protect it from harmful development. The group worked to purchase and restore agricultural fields to prairie plantings and wetlands and used the property for passive recreation. Shortly after Martha passed and Crow’s Grove came to NICHES, the group opted to further protect a portion of the Warren Piece property including wooded slopes above Big Pine creek and prairie restorations with a conservation easement held by NICHES.

We began strengthening relationships with our new partners and neighbors, and within another year Dana, Kathleen, and neighbors Mike and Pam Murr donated a total of 24 acres to NICHES along the Big Pine, known as Honey Branch Bluff after the tributary to the Big Pine that winds its way through the property.



Left: Crow’s Grove (33 acres) donated by Martha Crow-Pugh. Photo by: Gary Morrison.

Right: Honey Branch Bluffs (22 acres) donated Mike and Pam Murr, Dana Goodman, and Kathleen Kitch.

NICHES began aggressive and thoughtful stewardship of these new preserves immediately and expanded our relationships with neighbors and community members as we worked. We partnered with the USFWS for cost-share projects to remove woody invasives at Crow’s Grove and Honey Branch Bluff. We also partnered with USFWS to implement thinning of mesic trees for the health of the white pine populations and oak woodland at Crow’s Grove, Honey Branch Bluff, and Warren Piece. We began conducting prescribed fire across all the preserves in rotation and incorporated them into the deer cull with help from local volunteers and neighbors to conduct safe and effective reduction hunts using guidelines developed by George Parker, one of NICHES founding members.

In 2017 we collected our first seed from the white pines at Crow's Grove to begin our regional project to restore and augment stands of the iconic species, now rare as a natural occurrence in Indiana, to about a dozen appropriate preserves under management by NICHES.

In 2019 Roy and Bob Coolman reached out to us with an interest in donating another 26 acres along the Big Pine, situated directly between Honey Branch Bluff and Fall Creek Gorge. This property includes rare seepage communities and sandstone barrens as well as a population of white pine on the sandstone bluffs and remnant white oak savanna. The Coolman brothers had too many children and grandchildren to decide who should get the special family property along the creek, so they opted to have the family cabin surveyed out and donate the natural areas to NICHES so their family could continue to enjoy their rural getaway and the property could receive the stewardship that it deserves. The brothers were so grateful to John and Donna Swanson for selling them the land over 30 years ago that they not only wanted to return the property to public use, but also named the preserve Swansons's Bluff after the former owners.



A scene from the banks of Swanson's Bluff, donated to NICHES in 2019 by Roy and Bob Coolman. The preserve is NICHES fourth holding in the Big Pine Creek Valley. Photo by: Gary Morrison.

As our ecological and community presence within the Big Pine Valley grew, we began collaborating with the Nature Conservancy stewards who cared for Fall Creek Gorge. This preserve was far from the TNC's base of operations, and this presented logistical challenges in managing the site and the many annual visitors it receives. Around this time, a discussion of NICHES eventually taking over management of Fall Creek Gorge was initiated. In 2020, when overuse and abuse from the public spiked, the Nature Conservancy had to make the difficult choice to close the preserve indefinitely. In October of 2021, while the preserve was still closed, the Nature Conservancy transferred Fall Creek Gorge to NICHES, along with 2 other state-dedicated sites in Tippecanoe County, for care in perpetuity.

With a vision of an increasingly connected Big Pine Valley Corridor coming into focus, we wasted no time organizing our heavily engaged community of local volunteers, neighbors, and conservation partners around this new and exciting project. We immediately started a collaboration between NICHES, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and a neighboring landowner to mow down over 40 acres of invasive autumn olive shrubs on the preserve and neighboring 100-acre private property. NICHES has long considered this stand of invasive shrubs, which has undoubtedly parented other infestations through seed dispersal by birds, as one of the largest ecological threats in the Big Pine Valley. Skilled operators were able to clear the major infestation across the two properties in only six days in the dead of winter. Another neighbor was generous enough to allow the operators to stage their equipment at their home and plug in the machines overnight so that the diesel plugs did not freeze in the extreme cold.



Before and after pictures of autumn olive thicket removal at Fall Creek Gorge in the Winter of 2022.

In order to make the effort last, NICHES acquired private funding to pay our partners at Ecologic to come in and treat the resprouts of the invasives shrubs with a carefully applied foliar treatment using broadleaf specific herbicide to minimize collateral damage to the recovering native vegetation. Securing this majorly impactful partner help and neighbor collaboration



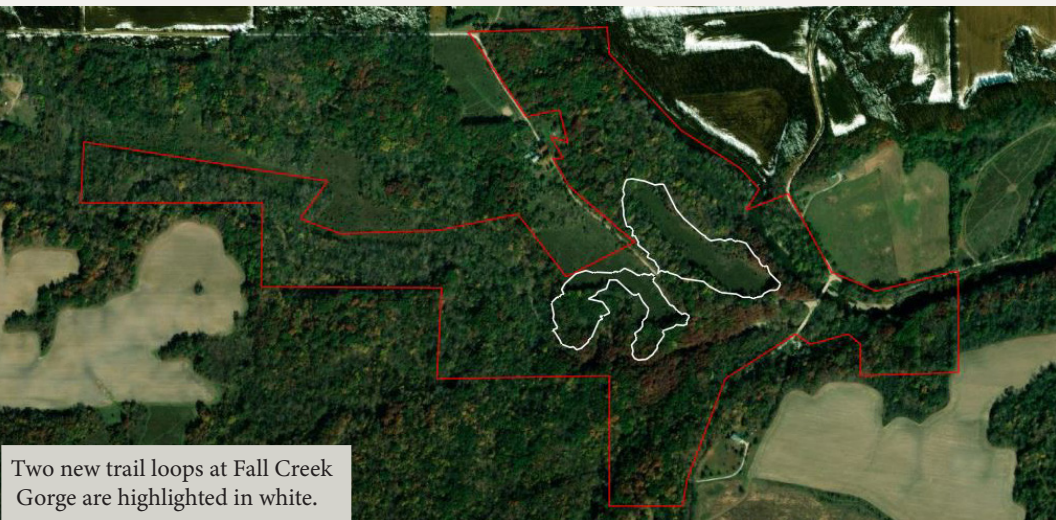
On March 17 NICHES completed its first controlled burn at Fall Creek Gorge. Photo by: Chad Phelps

allowed NICHES staff to focus on completing our first prescribed fire over 43 acres of the preserve, complete maintenance work on stiltgrass across the property, make contact and build relationships with all the surrounding landowners, and engage the local community in reshaping the public's relationship to this iconic preserve.

Between the forestry mulching in January and the resprout control in August, we began to focus on what changes would need to occur in order to eventually reopen this preserve to the public. To start this process we created an informal group called ‘The Friends of Fall Creek Gorge’ (FOFCG) that consisted of neighbors to the preserve, leaders in the community, conservation partners, and local volunteers. The first FOFCG meeting focused on detailing past abuse of the preserve and re-imagining access in a way that would avoid some of the historic pitfalls. We discussed the idea of moving the parking lot to another location and developing an expanded trail system as a way to reframe the public experience at the property. Our aim was to diffuse attention across the large preserve, help avoid some of the repeated public use issues and highlight previously unseen perspectives of Big Pine and Fall Creek.

During a NICHES staff meeting, two new prospective trail loops on the north side of Fall Creek were plotted out. We worked with the Division of Nature Preserves, which holds an easement over the property (as they do with all state-dedicated nature preserves) to seek approval and guidance for this mile-and-a-half addition of new trail. The DNP was very supportive of the changes we had in mind and even helped adjust the routes of the trails after we flagged them out to be more lasting and easier to maintain and gave advice on the best hand tools and techniques to use to begin cutting in the trails.

With the new trail plans in place, the Friends of Fall Creek Gorge wasted no time jumping into action to push the project forward. First, a series of trash cleanup workdays were organized to remove several internal dumps and the remains of an old house foundation from the preserve. In mid-May, as the annual bloom of spring ephemeral wildflowers was beginning to wind down, construction of the new trail began.



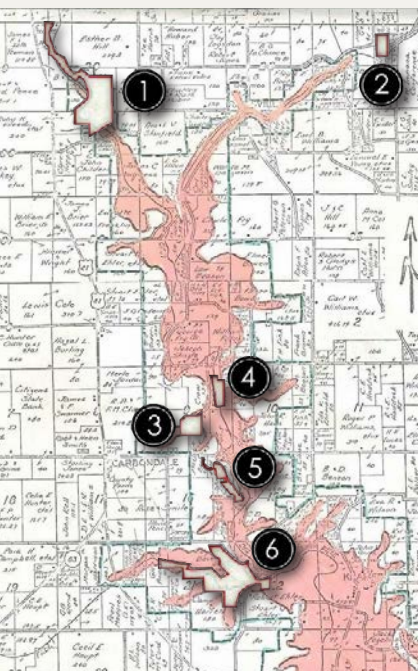
Two new trail loops at Fall Creek Gorge are highlighted in white.

Over the next 5 months, the Friends of Fall Creek Gorge and representatives from the Warren County Community Foundation met up for 7 different workdays to cut in the two new trail loops. Their work was aided by a corporate volunteer workday with employees of Caterpillar Inc. and a 50-person workday with the local Seeger High School Football Team. In the spring of 2023 the group will reconvene to help install the new parking lot with funding through the Warren County Community Foundation. This past November, 13 local hunters, organized by NICHES Steward Justin Harmeson, helped to complete a deer cull on the preserve. NICHES hopes to reopen this local natural treasure to the public in the summer of 2023.



Friends of Fall Creek Gorge Members cutting in the new trail.

In NICHES strategic plan, our 2030 goals for the Big Pine Creek Watershed are as follows: *“1,600 acres of oak woodlands, savannas, and prairie managed with fire in the Big Pine Watershed. 75% in permanent NGO ownership/easement or public ownership.”* As of today, NICHES has under



ownership/easement 7 properties totaling 484 acres in the Big Pine Watershed. All these properties are actively being stewarded and managed with fire. The immediate neighbors around Fall Creek Gorge who we have been engaging with represent another 618 acres of potential conservation land, and we continue to build relationships with other neighbors and landowners throughout the Big Pine Valley.

With your support, NICHES can meet our goals for the Big Pine Watershed and other focus areas across our service area. Maintaining quality stewardship through this growth will require expanding both stewardship facilities and stewardship staff to meet the increasing demand of our growing portfolio of nature preserves. NICHES staff thanks you for what you as a member have made possible for us, which is pairing passion with resources to protect nature and to nurture a community that embraces the natural world.

NICHES preserves in the Big Pine Creek Valley*

- 1) Hewitt Estate (on Mud Pine Creek) - 163 acres
- 2) Rhus Radicans - 20 acres
- 3) Crows Grove - 33 acres
- 4) Honey Branch Bluffs - 24 acres
- 5) Swanson's Bluff - 26 acres
- 6) Fall Creek Gorge - 163 acres

*NICHES Warren Piece Easement not pictured

Gift Planning

You can leave a legacy of conservation by including NICHES in your estate plan. Your gift shows a commitment to local natural areas and your legacy will provide opportunities for others to experience the wonders of the natural world. A few simple ways to empower this work in perpetuity include naming NICHES as a beneficiary in your:

1. IRA through a cash bequest or a charitable remainder trust.
2. Life Insurance
3. Will or Estate Plan
4. Brokerage, bank accounts, or donor advised funds

"The natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living."

-Sir David Attenborough

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



Every year hundreds of volunteers donate their time and talents to NICHES Land Trust's mission of protecting, restoring, and sharing local ecosystems. Our volunteer base represents a quilt work of different ages, experiences, and backgrounds, and everyone contributes in their own unique way. Some volunteers assist by maintaining our hiking trails, others help with invasive species removal projects, and some, like retired English teacher Richard Fudge, assist by proofreading the very text you are reading right now! NICHES would like to extend a special thanks to volunteers Greg and Brenda Moore for their many years of helping create and maintain the beautiful wooden signage that welcomes visitors to some of our preserves. The above picture of Brenda repainting the sign at our Mulvey Pond Preserve was taken by our volunteer photographer Chad Phelps. Thank you, NICHES volunteers, for helping protect land for and by the people!



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