

THE SPROUT

A watercolor illustration of a mother opossum with several of her young on her back, surrounded by foliage. The mother opossum is in the center, looking towards the right. She has grey and white fur with a dark stripe down her back. Several small, fluffy young opossums are perched on her back, looking in various directions. The background is a soft, painterly depiction of green and yellow leaves and branches.

NICHES LAND TRUST | FALL 2023 | VOLUME 27 ISSUE 3

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Cover art by: Gabriela Sincich

"I think the world will be saved by millions of small things" -Pete Seeger

Executive Director Update

This edition of the Sprout reminds me that change is the only constant in life. Some changes we are thrilled about include Zach Neff staying with NICHES as a permanent, year-round Land Steward following his graduation from Purdue this May. Growing our stewardship staff provides NICHES with the necessary support to elevate what we are clearly capable of doing – implementing the highest quality land stewardship possible for these deserving habitats.

We experienced alarming change out of our control this summer as huge portions of North America faced highly unhealthy air quality from the smoke of massive wildfires in Canada. These wildfires are a symptom of great disruptions to habitats, land management, and the climate. We adapted our summer camp plans to keep the children safe while still engaging with Nature in a meaningful way. The impactful work of NICHES gave us the fresh air of hope. Protecting, Restoring, and Sustaining local natural areas is the most effective way we can help the Earth, support resilience, and mitigate the harmful effects of the changing climate.



Butterfly weed blooming at NICHES recently acquired Farris North Farm preserve in White County. (Photo: Bob Easter)

An incredibly exciting change for NICHES is the donation of 400 acres in White County by our friend Lois Lynn Farris. The Farris North Farm is officially NICHES's second largest property and the largest donation in our organization's history. We are so honored by Lois Lynn's trust in NICHES. We are so grateful for her foresight to plan a meaningful impact through the donation of land with a restoration

vision and contribution of funds to make it a reality. With additional funding support from conservation partners, we are determined to make this the highest quality restoration in the state of Indiana.

Expanding stewardship staff, connecting youth with nature, ensuring lasting protection for natural areas, and restoring ecosystems are all worthwhile changes made possible by donations from caring people like you. We thank you deeply for your continued financial support and remain optimistic about the future of natural areas we are building together.

-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis
shannon@nicheslandtrust.org

NICHES Adds a Full-Time Steward!

I am very excited to have joined the NICHES staff full-time this spring after 3 years as a seasonal steward while I completed my degree in Natural Resources and Environmental Science at Purdue. Having a clear idea of the career I wanted to have in ecological restoration from interning with NICHES early in my college journey helped me best focus my learning on relevant topics in soil science, plant ecology, and habitat management. I've learned at least as much working with NICHES as I did from my formal schooling, and experiencing both simultaneously gave me a chance to mix the conceptual knowledge I learned from coursework with applied, practical skills gained as a land steward.

What kept me with NICHES as other opportunities presented themselves is the focus on great stewardship of high-quality properties that NICHES keeps as the highest priority. I place a huge value on natural areas that protect diversity for people to enjoy, and I can't think of a better place to steward those areas than near where I grew up and in such spectacular natural communities.

This summer we have accomplished incredibly impactful work at new properties in core conservation areas to expand the ranges of conservative plant communities and support rare wildlife. Not only is NICHES expanding acreage and restoring plant communities, but we're doing it in a very focused and careful way that prioritizes the rarest habitats, connectivity between preserves, and relationships with organization partners to further the mission in the best way possible. A couple of projects I've really enjoyed working on recently are foliar spraying fecon/fire woody resprouts at Fall Creek Gorge and Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East, as getting to do such effective and targeted work is a culmination of a lot of planning and effort and also a precursor to more top-notch work in and around these areas. As I continue in my role as a Land Steward, I hope to develop more experience and responsibility in rare plant conservation, prescribed fire, and restoration planning to better guide NICHES properties and educate others on implementation of the best management actions to protect and restore the wonderful natural communities of our region.



-NICHES Land Steward, Zach Neff
zach@nicheslandtrust.org

A Decade of Discovery

Between June 12th and June 30th, NICHES hosted 3 weeks of Summer Adventure Camp for local children aged 11-14. We are excited to announce that this year's program engaged 35 children, more than any other year in NICHES history! Camp activities included floating local waterways, learning about macro-invertebrates, feeding wolves, tree-identification hikes, electrofishing, animal track casting, and more. This was also the first year when a past camper returned to share their time and passion as a Junior Counselor. Thank you, Aria "Armadillo" Cummings!

In addition to being NICHES largest camp ever, this year's program marked another milestone for me personally: my 10th year of running camps! From 2012 to 2014, while I was in high school, I founded a nature camp program in southeastern Indiana called "Un-Plugged Nature Camp." The goal of this camp was to share experiences that I had in my own childhood growing up with a naturalist mother, to get kids out in the woods and off their recently popularized iPhones, and to help save up money to buy my first car. It was this experience that opened my eyes to the world of natural education, and I knew then it was something I wanted to pursue in my career beyond high school.



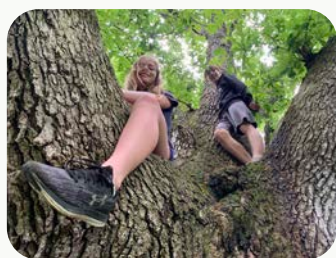
Catching pollinators at Un-Plugged Nature Camp (Circa 2012)

In 2017, I helped conduct my first nature camp with NICHES under the guidance of our Communication Director at the time, Nyssa Lilovich. Over the next 6 years NICHES Adventure Camp has steadily grown to attract more participants, involve a wide array of local partners, and provide an increasingly impactful natural experience. Notable partnerships that have developed in that time include Purdue's Entomology and FNR (Forestry and Natural Resources) Extension Programs, Lafayette Urban Ministry, Warren Piece, Prophetstown State Park, Climb Lafayette, Wolf Park, and a host of independent educators, artists, and ecologists from across the region.

As camp has evolved over the past decade, so has the world around it. From a global pandemic that threatened the very existence of camp, to this year's extreme heat and poor air quality, presenting nature to children as something that is in danger and worth protecting has never been more important. At a time when technology and social media flood our lives with information, it's essential we teach our children that nature is fantastically complex and worth their attention. Much has changed over the last 10 years and it's certain to continue changing as we and our planet figure out how to co-exist. However, one thing that hasn't changed, which gives me profound hope, is the wonder, discovery, and excitement expressed by a child when a salamander is uncovered from under a log.

In the face of it all, perhaps this is a thin thread to cling to, but our innate love for the natural world, which we are a part of, has been a common thread I've observed in every camper over the past 10 years. It's a trait that also clearly shines through in every adult that volunteers, supports, and interacts with our organization. If I've learned anything over the past decade, it's that our love for nature is instinctual only if we are in the right environment for it to be expressed. Cheers to the next 10 years of discovering ourselves in Nature!

-NICHES Volunteer & Outreach Coordinator, "Salamander Sam" Cody
sam@nicheslandtrust.org



Camp would not be possible without our local partner organizations, the enduring passion and support of NICHES Summer Seasonal Staff, and sustaining financial support from NICHES members like you! Thank you to our camp sponsors: Geswein Farm & Land, Arconic Foundation, and Lafayette Urban Ministry.

LEAP Project Questions

As stewards of the land and environment, NICHES Land Trust remains committed to staying informed about land development projects that have the potential to impact our natural resources. As part of this effort, we want to share information with our membership about a significant land development project within our community. The Limitless Exploration/Advanced Pace (LEAP) innovation district project, encompassing up to 11,000 acres in Boone County, is gaining momentum under the leadership of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC). The LEAP Innovation District is situated north and west of Lebanon, near the junction of US 52 and Interstate 65. The project is envisioned as a hub for economic growth and innovation, attracting substantial investments from major corporations, with commitments exceeding billions of dollars.

One of the natural resource concerns associated with the LEAP project revolves around its water supply. IEDC intends to draw water from collection wells located on property along the Wabash River near Goose Island in Tippecanoe County and transport it via a 35-mile pipeline to Lebanon. Lafayette Mayor Tony Roswarski notes that 17 mgd (million gallons per day) is the most the city pumps on the hottest summer day.



A birds eye conceptual rendering of the LEAP Lebanon innovation district. The IEDC claims that 9,000+ acres are already ready to parcel for manufacturing, R&D facilities, or corporate campuses.

Some reports indicate that IEDC's expectations might start out below that level but could rise to 100 mgd. The sustainability of this proposed water supply remains largely unexamined, leaving the community with many unanswered questions. Additionally, there are concerns about drawing water from groundwater levels above the pre-glacial Teays aquifer, which serves as a water source for many in the county. Currently NICHES is unaware of how drawing this water may affect the sensitive eco-systems at our nearby Granville Sand Barrens Preserve which are home to several state-endangered plant and animal species.

IEDC has begun studies and installed test wells to assess the impact of these withdrawals and IEDC reports encouraging preliminary results. However, that final report is not yet available. IEDC has committed to permitting a third party review of the final report when that is available. As County Commissioner Tom Murtaugh and Mayor Roswarski have noted, IEDC also has contracted for the utility locates for placement of a pipeline as well as the preliminary engineering of the pipeline. Local elected officials are meeting regularly with representatives of IEDC to stay informed.

The transfer of water from one watershed to another, the impacts on floodplains, and the potential consequences for river and stream beds are complex issues that call for careful consideration. More information and recorded public forums about the project are available at the League of Women Voters of Greater Lafayette website. NICHES is committed to staying informed on the LEAP project and other land developments projects that have implications for water resources so that we can best manage the habitats under our protection.

-NICHES LEAP Pipeline Subcommittee
niches@nicheslandtrust.org



Native plants flourishing in the delicate and hydrologically unique soils of NICHES Granville Sand Barrens Preserve (Photo by: Chad Phelps).



Black Rock Nature Preserve: Purchase made possible by Jerry Hunley and Margy Deverall

Photograph by: Chad Phelps



[Handwritten signature]

NICHES Adds 400 Acres!

One of the great joys of working for NICHES Land Trust is the opportunity to carry on the legacy of our community members. Especially gratifying is when an estate plan is so well thought out and coordinated as the one left behind by our late friend Lois Lynn (Lowe) Farris. Lois bequeathed generous gifts to Indiana DNR, The Nature Conservancy, and NICHES Land Trust upon her passing in November of 2021. In part, NICHES received from her estate the 400-acre Lois Farris North Farm, a mix of tillable acres and remnant natural area, with the stipulation that we follow through with a restoration plan put together in coordination with NICHES back in 2005 when we were still an all-volunteer organization with only 10 properties protected.

Lois was a keen woman who lived 99 years in the Monon area. The great-great-granddaughter of Charles Lowe, who moved to the Monon area in the early 1830's and bought 240-acres, she graduated from International Business College in Ft. Wayne in 1941 and joined in managing the family's farms and cattle business. The Lowe family land had grown to over 900-acres and it was passed down to her through the generations. Among many other ventures she worked part-time in the Jasper Newton Mental Health Center and upon her resignation she was described as "Straight forward, no-nonsense, to the point, businesslike, and professional in every way."

Lois loved animals both wild and domestic and it was of paramount importance to her that she preserved her family's land and heritage, in particular, for the benefit of wildlife. Personal letters between NICHES founders and early board presidents, Susan Ulrich, Ted Harris, and Jim Mcglone from 2002-2004 show how the plan came together. NICHES representatives were honest with Lois that the organization did not have the resources or staff that the DNR or TNC could provide for restoration efforts, but she chose to include NICHES alongside these more well-established organizations in her estate plan anyway.

A simple plan outlining the creation of a mix of dry prairie, savanna, wet prairie and wetlands across the 400-acre North Farm was compiled in 2005 and recorded with her will. I have taken this simple plan and began to build out the details of a restoration and revitalization project that will honor Lois's wishes, likely beyond what she could have imagined. NICHES is bringing in our conservation partners with the USDA, USFWS, DNR, Ecologic LLC, Midwest Biological Survey LLC, and more to support

NICHES staff and board efforts to set a new bar for restoration work with this opportunity. We are working with-up spraying of invasive shrub thickets and invasive forage grasses. The remnant areas retain significant populations



The Farris Estate Restoration Plan recorded in Lois Farris's will in 2005. NICHES plans to use this document as the foundation for a more detailed long-term stewardship project.

of conservative prairie species including leadplant, white false-indigo, porcupine grass, and many more. We hope to revive the health of these areas and hopefully draw more conservative species out of the seed bank while we work to enroll the property into the WRE program through the USDA and plan the restoration of the farmed ground to create a 400-acre block of mosaic habitat.

We plan to use the local conservation club, which was started by Lois's father Edward Lowe, as our volunteer hunting

crew for the Farris Estate, and they will work to help us remove interior fencing on the property and prepare for our first prescribed burn this September.

A detailed map of all the invasive species across the property will be developed along with a calendar of treatments, which will be completed as a USFWS Partner's Project. USFWS employees will complete forestry mulching in the winter of 2023/2024 and Ecologic, along with NICHES staff, will match that effort with foliar herbicide treatments through 2024. Also, in 2024 Midwest Biological Survey will complete a full plant inventory of the remnant areas and NICHES board member and former Purdue soil scientist John Graveel will complete a full soil survey of the tillable acres. This work will inform the restoration of the tillable acres and ensure that we create something that fits the canvas of the landscape and heals another small piece of the local world we call home.

It is with humble gratitude that I thank Lois for her trust in NICHES Land Trust, a local grassroots organization, to care for this portion of her family's land in perpetuity. It is with great respect that I stand on the shoulders of NICHES founders and bring the vision they shared with Lois nearly 20-years ago home.

-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter
rlaster@nicheslandtrust.org

Quarterly Highlights

On July 8th, NICHES participated in Greater Lafayette's annual Wabash Riverfest Celebration. Over the course of the day NICHES helped get over 100 people on the water in rafts, canoes, and kayaks. NICHES also operated an informational booth to share our conservation mission with the public.



On July 15th NICHES hosted an outreach event 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. The day included several hiking tours of NICHES preserves in Warren County, discussions of land restoration techniques, and a pizza party. Thank you to everyone who helps keep our preserves healthy and open for people around the globe to connect with and enjoy!

On July 18th and August 1st, NICHES hosted 2 groups of CILT's (Campers in Leadership Training) from Camp Tecumseh. 2023 marks the 3rd year of NICHES partnering with the CILT's Program. This year's volunteer efforts included pulling Queen Anne's Lace at NICHES Spring Creek Sanctuary Preserve and leaving our Frogs' Glory Preserve nearly mullein free!



For many years employees from Bob Rohrman Subaru have assisted in a variety of annual stewardship workdays. On August 8th Bob Rohrman Subaru volunteers gathered for the last time to pull Queen Anne's Lace at our Granville Sand Barrens Preserve. NICHES looks forward to continuing work with these amazing men and women under their new business name Zeigler Subaru of Lafayette.

On August 12th NICHES partnered with Purdue's Forestry and Natural Resources Program to host a member's only Hellbender Event. Hellbenders are the rarest salamander species in Indiana and the largest in North America. The event included a documentary screening and a tour of Purdue's Hellbender Rearing Facility by NICHES member and volunteer, Rod Williams.



Thank you to all the volunteers who came out on August 18th for our annual cleanup of Big Pine Creek! And an extra special thanks to NICHES Board Member Jill Evans who joined us on her birthday. On September 1st, 12 employees of Caterpillar Lafayette joined us for our annual cleanup of Wildcat Creek.

During 2021 and 2022, two Purdue EPICS Engineering Capstone classes worked to design and build a solar-powered garlic mustard composter. Disposing of the plant matter NICHES volunteers pull and preventing seed dispersal has been a longstanding challenge. The composter is designed to reach temperatures high enough to de-nature garlic mustard seeds. Educational signage designed by the team will help share info about this project and NICHES stewardship efforts.



On July 14th and September 8th, groups of volunteers gathered at NICHES Fall Creek Gorge preserve to help cut in part of the new trail system. On July 29th, an Eagle Scout Troop gathered to remove old signage and trail hardware from the preserve's original parking lot and trail. NICHES intends to eventually re-open this iconic local preserve with over 1.5 miles of new trail system for the public to enjoy!

On September 9th, NICHES hosted its annual Black Rock Society Dinner at the Wright Center in West 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.



Seasonal Steward Reflections

This summer has been monumental for my future as a Wildlife Biologist! I've learned dozens of native species while traversing the forests of many properties removing invasive species. Along with cutting down and spraying invasive plants, the stewards at NICHES collect seeds at different points of the year depending on the species; then they spread them to different properties with the same ecology to promote diversity and make the land true to what it was historically. I remember kneeling down to pick small brown seeds from hairy puccoon (*Lithospermum carolinense*) at Granville Sand Barrens and then spreading them at Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East. Seeing the intricacy and care the land stewards give to each property was inspiring! I also got the chance to guide and educate today's youth during summer camp. Watching their faces light up when they found animals like spiny softshell turtles (*Apalone spinifera*) warmed my heart. Thank you for a fantastic summer, NICHES!

- *Christie-Anna Hicks*

My time with NICHES has been a phenomenal experience, both highly informative and enjoyable. Intellectually, I am leaving with a greatly expanded capacity for plant identification, of native and invasive plants alike. Furthermore, being part of the stewardship process has taught me much about prioritization, maximizing efficiency and having flexibility when tasks don't go according to plan. Ultimately, this experience has imparted upon me the understanding that stewardship is an endlessly complex and growing field, and continuous learning and sharing of experience is vital to its success. Of equal importance is passion, and so many experiences helped to feed my passion for this work. To mention a few standouts,

I loved all the animal sightings on NICHES properties, such as the Sandhill Cranes at Mulvey Pond and the Box Turtles of Kohnkes. Additionally, it was incredibly rewarding to serve as a counselor for the NICHES nature camp, helping to lead our campers through so many cool

experiences, like the tube floating down Big Pine Creek and the tour of Wolf Park. Their fascination, excitement and curiosity was inspiring to behold, and I know that if

I was their age I would have had the time of my life.

- *Isaiah Robyne*

Isaiah and Christie-Anna behind a large pile of recently pulled Queen Anne's Lace.



A Community of Support

Over the last 15 years, through the Subaru Share the Love Event, Subaru of America, Inc. and participating retailers have donated more than \$256 million to charity, with customers choosing between four national charities and over 2,100 hometown charities. Between late November and January 1st, Zeigler Subaru will donate \$250 in your name for every vehicle purchased or leased as part of this year's 'Share the Love' event. Over the years, this event has raised over \$90,000 for NICHES!



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For more information on sponsorships, contact our Executive Director, Shannon Stanis at shannon@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 fourth 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 October 20th and 21st. 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.

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

