



# THE SPROUT

**NICHES LAND TRUST | WINTER 2023 | VOLUME 27 ISSUE 4**  
Road Crossing Celebration | Professional Development | 2023 Stewardship Gathering  
*Cover art by: Gabriela Sincich*

*“One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be broken.” -Leo Tolstoy*

## Executive Director Update

As the day length gets shorter and shorter, I joyfully observe nature's dynamic partnerships of late autumn. Prescribed fire cycles nutrients back to the soil. Drying flower stems and fallen leaves provide wintering habitat for insects. Squirrels are caching acorns for colder days ahead. Uneaten acorns will become oak saplings. Surviving insects will munch on those oak sapling leaves next year. All are connected within Nature's web, providing for others to create a healthy, functioning ecosystem.

This edition of The Sprout highlights that NICHES follows nature's guidance by fostering dynamic partnerships with many organizations to make an impact for natural areas within and beyond our service area.

A partner organization mentioned several times in this issue and deserving of special attention is the Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA). ILPA was established in 2000 as a coalition of land trusts, government agencies and other organizations seeking to coordinate efforts for land conservation. ILPA is guided by a shared vision of a resilient future for Indiana lands. NICHES has been involved with ILPA since the very beginning, helping to form and grow the organization. I am proud to serve on the ILPA board of directors and collaborate statewide to advance conservation in Indiana. I am especially proud of the NICHES staff for organizing a fruitful stewardship gathering this year for the ILPA community. We encourage you to show your support for Indiana's wetlands by completing the ILPA Wetlands Challenge highlighted on the back cover.

As we close the 2023 year, we extend a sincere thank you for supporting NICHES efforts, including fostering a collaborative and supportive environment for the staff within and beyond NICHES service area. Speaking of staff, we are excited to announce Jesica Hollinger as our new Director of

Development! Jes shares our passion for nature and a commitment to West Central Indiana. She is eager to connect with NICHES members and help make big things happen for local natural areas. Please join us to give Jes a warm welcome to the NICHES family!

If you have been fortunate this year and inspired by NICHES, please consider making a year-end gift to support NICHES' critical efforts for natural areas. Together, we are stewarding the future for Indiana's native habitats, and that future is so bright.

**-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis**  
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## NICHES Welcomes Jesica Hollinger

Greetings, everyone. What a pleasure to be nestled among the stunning green, gold, and red palate of leaves as I gaze out my office window and write my introduction to NICHES. As your new Director of Development, I feel privileged to be a part of the effort to protect, restore, and sustain our surrounding natural areas. Working in our beautiful headquarters at Clegg Memorial Gardens I can witness nature in action each day. Just this morning, a red-tailed hawk flew very close to my window. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought it raised its wing to wave hello and wish me luck.

As you get to know me better, you'll know I'm passionate about animals and nature. If you ever wander through Fountain County, you can stop by and meet my eclectic collection of "rescues" that include (but are not limited to) dogs, cats, horses, goats, ducks, and chickens. These animals live peacefully on our farm outside Attica where we raise organic row crops and pastured Angus cattle alongside the DeSutter family. Caring for the soil and producing a healthy, environmentally sustainable food supply are among our top priorities—priorities that integrate well with the overarching mission of NICHES.

Before coming to NICHES, I was fortunate to work at Purdue for more than 22 years in the areas of communication and fundraising. I'm excited to incorporate the knowledge and skills I learned there to the betterment of NICHES. Just a few weeks into my new position, I've already discovered that many of the brilliant and inspiring people I worked with at Purdue are also NICHES advocates. It's another reassurance that I landed in the right place! This fortifies my efforts to work hard so that NICHES can reach the goal of protecting 8,000+ acres by 2030. I'm confident we can get there, since it's already evident to me that NICHES supporters have the enthusiasm and capacity to be on board for this.

I can honestly say that I've worked and volunteered for several non-profits over the years but have yet to witness the unparalleled devotion I've noticed among NICHES members. This devotion inspires me to build a robust major gift and planned-giving initiative that will help us meet our aspirations. NICHES would not exist without your generosity, and the gravity of this reality isn't lost on me. Please drop me an email and introduce yourself, share your stories of why you love NICHES, and let me know how you are connected to this outstanding organization. I look forward to hearing from you. Together we can make a difference and see NICHES grow like never before. I'm excited about NICHES future ... Let's get started!

**-NICHES Development Director, Jesica Hollinger**  
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We encourage you to show your support for Indiana's wetlands by completing the ILPA Wetlands Challenge highlighted on the back cover. We have posted a wetland educational sign and an 'I ♥ Wetlands' Photo Op at the bird blind at Mulvey Pond for your education, enjoyment, and advocacy.

## Fall Creek Gorge Bioinventory Survey

In the early 1990s Gayle Tonkovich and Malcolm Sargent from the University of Illinois conducted vascular plant surveys at Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve. In 1993 they published “The Vascular Plants of Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve, Warren County, Indiana” in the Proceedings of the Indiana Academy of Science. During their work they described the habitats at the 160+ acre preserve with detailed maps and vouchered 351 species of vascular plants. An annotated list of the documented species was included in the paper with information on habitat and specifics on locations and abundance of the species. Since then, 30 years have passed and the presence, abundance, and distribution of species on the preserve have seen significant changes which we believe are important to document as NICHES assumes ownership of the preserve, after a transfer from The Nature Conservancy in late 2021.

NICHES is currently working with Rich Hull of IU, as part of a larger multi-year project, to create fully vouchered plant lists for 11 NICHES sites in the lower Wabash Valley including Fall Creek Gorge. This year NICHES was awarded a grant through the Indiana Academy of Science and Indiana Land Protection Alliance to hire Midwest Biological Survey LLC to supplement Rich’s efforts at Fall Creek Gorge and complete a paper following Tonkovich and Sargent. Rich and Nathanael have already collected and vouchered 340 species from Fall Creek Gorge as of June, with a special focus on grass and sedge species and some of the more difficult to identify genus. These groups of taxa were not documented well in the 1993 project and bolstering efforts on these species will give us a much better view of the flora at the preserve and a new baseline to compare to as we move forward with active stewardship of the preserve. Vouchered checklists are the gold standard for species documentation and since NICHES is managing several other properties in the Big Pine Valley with significant habitat and species overlap with Fall Creek Gorge, this work will inform management beyond the preserve.



Nathanael Pilla of Midwest Biological Survey and Rich Hull of Indiana University at NICHES Fall Creek Gorge preserve.

## Road Crossing Celebration at Clegg

On October 11, 2023 the NICHES community gathered to celebrate the pedestrian safety crossing at our headquarters, Clegg Memorial Gardens (Clegg). Located along Wildcat Creek on the edge of Lafayette, Clegg protects 17 acres with 4 distinct habitat types. With no entrance fee and over 1.5 miles of hiking trails, Clegg provides abundant free recreational opportunities for community residents and visitors year-round. Clegg has been open to the public since the 1960s. Crossing 400E from the parking lot to the nature preserve has always been a challenge and safety concerns have heightened as traffic has increased in the area over the last several decades.

NICHES board members and volunteers worked closely with the Tippecanoe County Highway Department to install a safe solution to the precarious road crossing. During the ribbon cutting celebration, Tippecanoe County Commissioner Tracy Brown shared that the county was happy to work with NICHES on a pedestrian safety crossing, as Clegg is “one of the prettiest places in Tippecanoe County,” and that safe access to this beloved local natural area improves quality of life.

The new safety crossing includes a crossing painted on the road, signage, and push buttons on both sides of the road. When the buttons are pushed, safety lights flash at the crossing, down the road 600 feet south of the crossing, and up the road 650 feet north of the crossing. These alert oncoming drivers to the pedestrian traffic. Visitors should still look both ways and ensure drivers are stopped before crossing the road. NICHES is thrilled about this safety improvement and how it has improved the visitor experience over the last year and a half.

Additional funding from Duke Energy and the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette supported NICHES’s costs for the parking lot, and for access improvements associated with the safety crossing and new amenities at Clegg. These include updated signage, wildlife carvings in the natural play area, and converting the porch into the Duke Energy Observation Deck. NICHES thanks Tippecanoe County and our sponsors and our tireless volunteers for supporting this project. We especially thank Jason Rakoczy, who used 6 of his 9 years of board service to lead this project and make it a reality for the community.



NICHES friends and supporters gather for a ribbon cutting ceremony at Clegg Memorial Garden.

# Professional Development

NICHES stewardship staff is hard at work year-round completing objectives from our stewardship plan. The bulk of our objectives are the ‘boots on the ground’ stewardship work that we talk about all the time- removing invasive species, promoting native species, prescribed fire, etc. In addition to these objectives, we also set goals and budget for professional development for all stewardship staff.

In 2023 Justin, Zach, and I worked on professional development through a variety of workshops, conferences, and participation in continued education with our partners. Making sure that each of us are continuing to grow our skills and questioning where and how we can do better is what keeps our program leading the way in stewardship of natural areas in the Midwest. Professional development includes attending workshops and conferences, but also taking on new responsibilities within the organization. These other items can include, for example, building skills through surveying vegetation to create plant checklists for NICHES preserves and joining partners in the field for new experiences.

This year Zach Neff joined the full-time stewardship team and has taken his professional development goals seriously. In 2022, when Zach was still part-time with NICHES, he picked up a copy of Paul Rothrock’s “Sedges of Indiana and the Adjacent States – The Carex Species Volume II” and brought it with him to study on the way to and from field sites all summer. In early June of this year, he took the next step in building that botanical knowledge by attending a two-day sedge workshop put on by Nathanael Pilla through the Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA). Both Zach and Justin each worked on building plant checklists for five NICHES preserves, to add to the lists that we already have hosted on the Consortium of Midwest Herbaria website. Building better botanical skills is an essential component of being a good practitioner and naturalist.

Justin was interested in working on grant writing as a skill to bring to the NICHES team, and he was successful in acquiring a \$2,500 grant through the Indiana Academy of Science/ILPA to help pay for a vascular plant inventory at NICHES new Farris Estate preserve in White County. The inventory will be completed in 2024 by Midwest Biological Survey. Zach took on the responsibility of ordering and coordinating delivery of herbicide for NICHES projects.

Prescribed fire is an important part of NICHES stewardship program and Justin and Zach both took the opportunity to engage in multiple programs to help build our understanding of prescribed fire as a management tool. Between August 29-31, Justin and Zach attended a NE-MW Regional Prescribed Fire Science and Management Workshop in Madison, Wisconsin, which featured a packed schedule of great presentations from national leaders in the realm of prescribed fire. Zach also represented NICHES at the Indiana Prescribed Fire Council meeting for a field day looking at areas in northern Indiana with different fire return intervals



Scenes from the Northeast-Widwest Prescribed Fire and Management Workshop in Madison Wisconsin.

and discussing strategies to deal with problem species using fire. Justin and Zach were both able to take advantage of an invitation to help Purdue with a growing season burn on September 20th; they immediately had the opportunity to be a part of a burn type which had been discussed at the conference they had attended in August.

I also sought out professional development opportunities through the year including attending a

Natural Systems Function conference in Missouri put on by Justin Thomas of NatureCITE in May. Topics included trauma (human and more than human), fire effects, cultural constructs, nitrogen-driven dynamics, paradigm paralysis, cognitive dissonance, reciprocal outcomes, floristic quality assessment, thermodynamic ecological stability, invasive species, and system integrity. This conference led me to a revelation about carbon: nitrogen ratios and how these affect establishment and development in restorations, leading to new experimental approaches in the field.

In September I was invited to join the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) All Hands Meeting, in Davenport, Iowa, as a participant in the program, representing one of about 30 partners across Region 3 for USFWS. I participated in two roundtable discussions with a moderator and a mix of land trust representatives (2 from Ohio, 1 from Minnesota, and 1 from Wisconsin) about our organizations and how we partner with USFWS. In addition, I attended the other conference presentations and had multiple meetings to build relationships with this important partner organization.

All three of the full-time NICHES stewardship staff are dedicated life-long learners and the items mentioned above are just some of the main highlights of the professional development we engaged in this year. NICHES leadership is dedicated to supporting its staff in seeking out opportunities to grow and learn as we work hard on NICHES mission.

*-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter  
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USFWS All Hands Meeting in Davenport Iowa.



2023 Fall Colors at NICHES Gladys and Al Wright Rock Creek Preserve

*Photograph by: Chad Phelps*

## Quarterly Highlights

On September 16th NICHES partnered with the Tippecanoe Invasive Cooperative Task Force (TICT) to host a weed wrangle at our Granville Sand Barrens Preserve. NICHES will partner with TICT and the Tippecanoe County Soil and Water Conservation District for next year's 'War of the Weeds' events.



On September 1st, Volunteers from Caterpillar Lafayette embarked on a cleanup of Wildcat Creek. Cleanup efforts were focused between Peter's Mill Landing and the Davis Ferry Access Point on the Wabash.



On September 21st, employees from Tipmont REMC helped float and clean an additional section of Wildcat Creek from Wildcat Park to NICHES' Peter's Mill Access Point. This section is one of the busiest on the creek.



NICHES hunting crew service projects included a trail workday at Shawnee Bottoms on September 9th, fire break prep workdays at Shawnee Bottoms and Black Rock on September 30th, and signage restoration at Wabash Bottoms, Granville Sand Barrens, and Roy Whistler Wildlife Area on October 6th.



On October 14th, NICHES partnered with ILPA and the Indiana Audubon Society to host a birding event at our Mulvey Pond Preserve. In addition to a variety of bird species, participants also spotted some herpetological highlights! Thanks to Rachel Brent for leading this hike!



On October 25th, Student Ambassadors from Purdue's Natural Resource and Environmental Science Program helped clean native plant seeds! Species cleaned included white false indigo, blue vervain, and late figwort.



On November 1st, NICHES kicked off the fall burn season with a prescribed fire at our Roy Whistler Wildlife Area Preserve in Tippecanoe County. Special thanks to Angie Garcia-Miller for all the help!



On November 4th, volunteers gathered in Montgomery County for our annual cleanup of Sugar Creek. Cleanup efforts were focused between NICHES Bachner Preserve and the Jim Davis Bridge.

## Clegg Jack-o-Lantern Hike Winners

The votes are in, and we're excited to announce the winners of our 4th Annual Jack-o-Lantern Hike at Clegg Memorial Garden! Congratulations to Jed David Wilkinson for taking home the 1st place prize with his "Munching Pumpkin." Check out our top 5 pumpkins below, as well as some honorable mentions.

We are so appreciative of everyone's time, help, and creativity to make it a success! This year we lined the trail with 264 pumpkins, raised \$3k, and welcomed over 600 registered hikers through our gates! Special thanks to Deborah Kull, Jordan Young, Ian Polito, and Dave Cody for helping light pumpkins and check in visitors. Thanks to the Tippecanoe Soil & Water Conservation District for providing Halloween candy for the event.



*"The Clegg Gardens have been one of our favorite family outdoor areas to enjoy for years. We were so excited for the opportunity to give something back and to enjoy the gardens at night! The event was so much fun, and we are adding it to our Halloween Family To-Do every year! Thanks to everyone who donated their time and energy to provide such a wonderful and magical evening for all to enjoy!"*

**-2023 Jack-o-Lantern Hike Winner, Jed Wilkinson**

# 2023 Stewardship Gathering

Since NICHES was founded 28 years ago, we have continuously sought to steward the ecosystems we protect to the highest level possible. By studying and applying a broad tapestry of conservation techniques and actively learning from our own successes and failures, we have established a regional reputation as a leader in land management. In 2016, to extend the impact of our work beyond our own service range, NICHES began an annual gathering of stewards from land trusts across the state. The goal of this inaugural gathering, hosted at Ross Park, was to share land management knowledge and techniques between organizations and collectively return more protected areas to functioning native ecosystems. A special focus of the first gathering was comparing notes and experiences with controlling stilt grass, which was an emerging management concern across the region at that time. In the years following, the hosting of the annual stewardship gathering rotated between different land trusts and attracted more likeminded organizations from across Indiana and neighboring states.

Now 8 years later, NICHES has partnered with the Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA) to once again host this annual gathering of stewards. Between September 26th and 28th, participants from 15 different conservation organizations gathered along Big Pine Creek in Warren County to share land management knowledge and techniques through a series of lectures, hikes, workshops, and discussions. Day 1 of the gathering kicked off with a creek hike along NICHES Honey Branch Bluff Preserve, handmade woodfired pizza from a cobb oven, and a presentation with Orbis Environmental Consulting Senior Wildlife Biologist Jeremy Sheets, followed by a night hike to listen for bats. The second day of the gathering began with a project to scout for and remove stilt grass from several NICHES preserves in the area. Collectively the group contributed over 160 volunteer hours (the equivalent of 4 weeks of work for a single steward) and left several target areas stilt grass free. Later in the day the group heard presentations from State of Indiana Cooperative Invasives Management (SICIM) Executive Director Stephanie Shuck, NICHES Stewardship Director Bob Easter, and Indiana Department of Natural Resources Regional Ecologist Danielle Williams. The final day of the event included presentations by NICHES board member Jarred Brooke about herbicides and BMP application and NICHES volunteer Phillip Patrie on operation and maintenance of spray equipment.

NICHES would like to thank ILPA, the speakers, and all participating organizations for their time, passion, and commitment to improving the health of ecosystems in our region. Special thanks to NICHES friends Bob & Connie Brutus, Kathleen Kitch, Dana Goodman, Mike Murr, Cody Hall, Marcie Hayes, Abby Hayes, Abby Fisher, Zac Cody, and Marian Rodriguez-Soto for their help setting up, hosting, and preparing food for this event!



Organizations represented at the 2023 Stewardship Gathering include ACRES Land Trust, Black Swamp Conservancy, Blue Heron Ministries, Central Indiana Land Trust, Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, LC Nature Park, Little River Wetlands Project, Orbis Environmental Consulting, Purdue University Extension, Red-Tail Land Conservancy, Shirley Heinze Land Trust, State of Indiana Cooperative Invasives Management, Sycamore Land Trust, and Wesselmann Woods.

# NICHES Annual Fund

Non-profit land trusts like NICHES play a crucial role in preserving natural habitats for future generations. These organizations rely on the generosity of donors to support their conservation efforts, and one of the most impactful ways you can help is by giving to our annual fund.

NICHES' annual fund is a critical source of unrestricted support for our work. It provides us with the flexibility to allocate resources where they are most needed, whether that's acquiring new land, maintaining existing properties, or funding educational programs.

By giving to the NICHES annual fund, you can ensure that your donation is put to the best possible use. Unlike restricted gifts, which are designated for a specific purpose, unrestricted donations give land trusts the freedom to invest in the most pressing conservation needs at any given time. This flexibility allows land trusts to respond quickly to emerging threats to natural habitats and to take advantage of unique opportunities as they arise.

In addition to supporting NICHES' core conservation mission, giving to the annual fund also has other benefits. It can help build a sense of community among fellow donors and supporters, as well as establish a reliable source of funding that we can count on year after year.

Moreover, supporting the annual fund can help raise awareness in our area about the importance of land conservation and encourage others to get involved. When you make a gift to the annual fund, you demonstrate your commitment to preserving natural habitats and inspire others to do the same. This creates a ripple effect that leads to even greater support for our conservation efforts.

Ultimately, giving to the NICHES annual fund is one of the most impactful ways you can help us to conserve our natural habitats. Your donation will provide crucial support for our organization's ongoing conservation efforts, and it will help ensure that these efforts continue for years to come. Whether you are a longtime supporter or a newcomer to the cause, your gift to the NICHES annual fund will make a real difference in protecting the environment and preserving our planet's natural beauty for future generations.

**-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis**  
[shannon@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:shannon@nicheslandtrust.org)

# A Community of Support

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

*"Every native species, however humble in appearance...has its place in the nation's heritage. It is a masterpiece of evolution, an ancient, multifaceted entity that shares the land with us"*

**-E. O. Wilson**

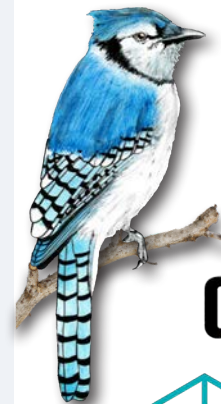
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For more information on sponsorships, contact Jesica Hollinger at [jesica@nicheslandtrust.org](mailto:jesica@nicheslandtrust.org) or call 765-423-1605.



Did you know that wetlands provide great volumes of food that attract many animals, and they provide shelter for 50% of species with small or declining populations in Indiana? Even small, isolated wetlands are important, often serving as the only refuge for relatively immobile reptiles and amphibians, such as salamanders. Join NICHES and ILPA in advocating for our state's wetlands through the Indiana Wetland Challenge!

Show your support for these sensitive ecosystems by creating a custom postcard for your legislators. With a personal photo and a positive message, your postcard will tell your elected officials that you care about wetland conservation in Indiana. A high-quality postcard will be printed with the photo and message you provide and then mailed to your elected official free of charge! This is an important step you can take from wherever you are to make your passion for Indiana's wetlands known to our state leaders. Please follow this link to join us in the Indiana Wetland Challenge:

(<https://tinyurl.com/Wetlands2023>)



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