

THE SPROUT

A detailed watercolor illustration of Virginia Bluebell flowers. The flowers are a vibrant blue with yellow stamens, and the leaves are a mix of green and yellow, suggesting a spring or early summer setting. The style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a gentle color palette.

NICHES LAND TRUST | SUMMER 2024 | VOLUME 28 ISSUE 2
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"Virginia Bluebell" Cover art by NICHES Volunteer: Gabriela Sincich

"The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs defenders"
-Edward Abbey

Executive Director Update

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

2024 Annual Meeting & Board Slate

NICHES members are invited to attend the 2024 Annual Meeting on June 22. Join us from 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. at the John S. Wright Forestry Center (1007 N 725 W, West Lafayette) for the presentation of the organization's annual report and board member election. The meeting will be followed by a potluck reception. Stick around for NICHES' special Birthday Celebration from 3:00 – 5:00 p.m., featuring cake, ice cream, and activities. Read more about the Birthday Celebration on page 14 and check out the NICHES website calendar for updates.

2024 Board Nominees & Re-Elections

As a member of NICHES Land Trust, you are invited to take part in the annual election of board members. If you cannot make the Annual Meeting on June 22, you can vote absentee by mailing the enclosed ballot envelope to our office. This year, we have 6 board members up for re-election and 4 members ready to serve their first term. There is room on the board for all 10 candidates.



Krista Johnson
(New Board Member)

Krista Johnson is a Botanist & Artist in Lafayette, IN. They obtained their BA in botany and a minor in horticulture from Purdue in 2020, and now works as a Greenhouse Lab Coordinator at the university. Krista has always gravitated towards community service, which has led them to work with organizations such as Felege Hiywot, NICHES, and Grow Local. Krista's goals are centered around intentional and impactful outreach, and ecological preservation and maintenance. In 2021 Krista established Lux e Noctis, a non-profit org aimed at educating about native plants, foraging and ecological restoration.

Mike is the owner and CEO of UpLync Communications, a telephone company based in Lafayette, Indiana. While growing up in rural southwest Missouri, Mike developed a love for exploring and spending time in nature. This continued into adulthood, reaching an apex in 2021 when he thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail. When he's not running UpLync, Mike enjoys spending time with friends and family, adventure biking, and relaxing in his hammock in quiet and remote spots.



Mike Bristol
(New Board Member)



Christian Knoeller
(New Board Member)

Before relocating to Indiana in 1999, Christian had been actively engaged in various conservation causes. This involvement includes working with Greenpeace in Oregon during the late 1970s, serving as a member of the Board of the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC) in Juneau in the mid-1980s, representing the Friends of Glacier Bay, and more recently advocating for the environment in Carroll County. Additionally, as an academic at Purdue University, Christian's primary scholarly focus has centered on environmental history.

Brad grew up exploring the outdoors in Minnesota, where he earned an undergraduate degree in biology. He then moved to Pennsylvania to earn a PhD in ecology; he studied amphibian ecology and behavior. Since 2014, he has been a biology professor at Wabash College and conducts research primarily focused on box turtles, including occasionally at NICHES preserves. Brad is passionate about protecting and restoring animal and plant populations and habitats. He lives in Crawfordsville with his spouse and their three children.



Brad Carlson
(New Board Member)



Jenna Isch
(Returning Board Member)

Jenna joined the NICHES Board in April 2021 and serves as the chair of the Governance Committee and as a member of the Development Committee. Jenna's involvement with NICHES started with her enjoyment of visiting Clegg Gardens and then becoming a corporate supporter of NICHES. Jenna owns a Farmers Insurance and Financial Services Agency in Lafayette. She is an Indiana native and has lived in the Greater Lafayette community for 17 years. She loves spending time outside exploring NICHES properties with her husband Andrew and daughter Quinn.

Jarred Brooke is a long-time NICHES supporter, volunteer, and generally a nature nerd. His full-time job is working as an Extension Wildlife Specialist at Purdue University, where he works with students, landowners, land managers, and conservationists to promote the sound stewardship of land and wildlife resources. In his free time, Jarred enjoys spending time outdoors hunting, foraging, hiking, and camping with his wife Macy and their young sons, Jack and JR.



Jarred Brooke
(Returning Board Member)



Mike Murr
(Returning Board Member)

Mike takes pride in his six-year tenure serving on the NICHES board and acquisition committee. He eagerly anticipates continuing to support NICHES in reaching its preservation goals. In addition to his board service, Mike is a regular participant in NICHES controlled burn crew. Mike believes that collectively as an organization we are enhancing North Central Indiana, making it a more favorable environment for people, plants, and wildlife.

Trent joined the NICHES board in 2018 and has served as the Development Committee Chair, Vice President, and President. Trent also serves as the Treasurer for NICHES Endowment Foundation. Outside of NICHES, Trent is a native of Lafayette, Indiana, and a graduate of Lafayette Jefferson High School and Purdue University. He is a Small Business Banker for Centier Bank. He has been married to Kristen since 2007, and they have 4 children. They enjoy hiking, camping, hunting and spending time outside as a family.



Trent Hanthorn
(Returning Board Member)

Brent joined the NICHES board in 2021 and currently serves as the Treasurer of the organization and chairs the Finance Committee. Outside of his day job as Regional President for First Merchants Bank, Brent enjoys coaching baseball, visiting national parks with family and friends, and being involved in a variety of community boards for organizations including Sunrise Christian Reformed Church, the United Way, the Purdue Center for Economic Education, and the Lafayette Parks Foundation.



Brent Talcott
(Returning Board Member)

John Graveel is beginning his seventh year on the NICHES board. John has served as the Director of the Natural Resources and Environmental Science (NRES) program at Purdue University and was a faculty member in the Agronomy Department. Since retiring in 2019 John has been actively involved in the renovation and updating of the trails at Clegg.



John Graveel
(Returning Board Member)

Williams Woods Addition

In February of 2024, NICHES expanded our Williams Woods preserve by 124 acres! Williams Woods now totals 240 acres and is our sixth largest property (Largest in order: Shawnee Bottoms, Farris Estate, Weiler-Leopold complex, Granville Sand Barren Complex, Fisher Oak Savanna).

This expansion was made possible by substantial grant funding through the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT) and the generosity of the Williams siblings, the Whistler Foundation, the Warren County Community Foundation, the Geoff and Josie Fox Family Foundation, the Central Indiana Land Trust, and the Ropchan Foundation.

Williams Woods is located at the historic meeting zone of Indiana's prairie and forest. This special band of savanna habitat has mostly been converted to agricultural production or become closed canopy forest in the absence of fire management. Savannas and many of the species that depend on them for habitat are endangered in Indiana and across the country. NICHES has been managing the 116 acres at Williams Woods as a savanna habitat, removing invasive species, thinning maples, restoring prescribed fire, and planting prairie and thicket restorations. Expanding protection at the site provides more of this critical habitat and enhances the effectiveness of the existing restoration.

The new 124 acres includes 34 acres of remnant savanna and old hay fields and 90 acres in agricultural production. Over the coming years, NICHES will do habitat improvements to the remnant and hay fields and plant the agricultural fields with a diverse prairie restoration mix. This seed mix was carefully designed using historical documentation of plant records in adjacent fields. Through careful management over time, including prescribed fire, the native thicket species and burr oaks will regenerate well throughout the prairie plantings and a contiguous 240-acre burr oak savanna will thrive.

The idea of expanding the preserve had been planned for years but the opportunity to do so sprouted with the announcement of the largest single investment of state dollars into conservation in Indiana's history. In May 2022, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced \$25 million dedicated for the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT) to preserve and protect important conservation, recreation, and historic areas for the public. With all the land trusts sitting on a backlog of acquisition opportunities, it was clear that all \$25 million would likely be allocated in the first round of funding with applications due August 1. NICHES acted quickly on this opportunity for substantial acquisition funding.

We identified an appropriate acquisition project that (1) met NICHES Land and Water Protection goals in our strategic plan and (2) would be a strong application for the NLCT guidelines and (3) could have an application completed in the very short application window. Expanding Williams Woods was the best option for the NLCT funding opportunity, and Jeff Williams was graciously willing to work with us on the application process. In June and July 2022, we worked diligently to gather 9 partner letters of support, align matching funds, and submit a very strong, 60-page application before the deadline. NICHES' reputation and longstanding relationships with federal, state, and county agencies, foundation partners, non-profits, and private landowners made this big endeavor possible. We are so grateful to our community partners for acting quickly to provide letters of support for this project: U.S. Department of Interior-Fish and Wildlife Service; Warren County Community Foundation; the Central Indiana Land Trust; Roy Whistler

Foundation; Warren County Commissioners and Council; Wabash River Enhancement Corporation; Indiana Native Plant Society; Sycamore Audubon Society; and the Williams family. Our application was approved for 75% of the purchase price (the maximum % allowed by the program)! This is the largest single grant in NICHES history. The NLCT funding is provided in exchange for a conservation easement held by DNR over the land purchased. Over the next year and a half, we worked with the DNR on the conservation easement details. We had the property surveyed, ensured clean title and land descriptions, and followed all the steps for our accreditation status. We secured the final matching funds needed thanks to our very generous supporters.

NICHES is honored to steward these special acres and grateful for the trust and generosity of the Williams Family to share the family farm with current and future generations.



In the spring of 2023 NICHES worked with our Aspen 1 AmeriCorps NCCC team to tube and stake over 3,000 planted shrubs at Williams Woods. In time, this thicket will become an important component of a recovering diverse native ecosystem that will provide mast and shelter for wildlife to utilize.



Virginia Bluebells at Williams Woods. *Photograph by NICHES friend and volunteer: Chad Phelps*



Nature Fact: Bluebell blooms start out as more of a pink or purplish-pink color before changing to the blue shade they are so famous for, and then returning to a more pinkish color after pollination.

Farris Estate Update

NICHES' largest partner project for 2024 at the Farris Estate is well underway, with the USFWS contributing an astonishing 174.6 acres of Fecon mowing between January-March using their employees and equipment. This maximized the agreed upon financial in-kind donation of \$20K for the Partner's Project through USFWS; however, the actual value of that work if we were to hire a contractor to complete it would be somewhere between \$150,000-\$200,000.

Areas with major infestations of invasive shrubs have been reduced to mulch and woody species cleared from remnant sand prairie to begin the recovery process of these rare natural areas. The Fecon work included installation of excellent fire breaks, which allowed NICHES staff to complete a 165-acre burn across the property in early February to further prepare for spraying resprouts of woody species and treatment of invasive smooth brome grass across the remnant sand prairie in coordination with Ecologic. Ecologic has carefully completed widespread herbicide treatment of brome grass as of mid-April and NICHES staff have been completing foliar treatments on reed canary grass, poison-hemlock and working on removal of invasive shrubs and trees that were inaccessible or too large for mowing with the Fecon head.

While working on Phase 1 of this project, we were notified that our application had been accepted for enrollment of the entire 400-acre property into the USDA Wetland Reserve Easement program, which will allow us to permanently retire and restore the currently farmed acres in a couple of years. This will be done following revitalization of the remnant areas, using funds from the NRCS and funds restricted for use at Farris Estate left to NICHES by Lois Lynn Farris. In addition to the major push for stewardship work, we have hired Midwest Biological Survey to complete a vascular plant inventory and baseline insect survey of the preserve in 2024 funded in large part by grants from the Indiana Academy of Science/ Indiana Land Protection Alliance.

NICHES is proud to see Lois Lynn Farris's wishes through for this special 400-acre preserve. We will continue working on the remnant acres through the growing season to ensure that all the forestry mown invasive shrubs are properly treated and that the areas begin to heal with the recovery of native plant communities. The goal is to have the remnant areas in the best shape possible before we enter Phase 2 and restore the row crop fields to diverse prairie plantings in coordination with NRCS, which will be informed by vascular plant and insect inventories and field observations through 2024.

A Decade of Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire is an 'all-hands-on-deck' activity for stewardship staff. I lead all the burns as NICHES' designated Fire Manager and have designed all of NICHES' burn units and plans of attack. Justin and Zach have been carrying much of the weight on burn break preparation, maintaining and mobilizing fire gear, and increasingly contributing input on what units we should target and when the call for a burn should be made.

Several volunteers, including Ken Jordan and board member Mike Murr have been on nearly every burn over the last couple of years and are gaining a real understanding of the operation, goals, hazards, and responsibilities of crew members. Another board member and fellow burn boss, Jarred Brooke, frequently serves on the fire line and often engages students in the Fire Ecology course he teaches at Purdue. Angie Miller and Aimee Parcell of NRCS have joined for multiple burns to better understand prescribed fire and promote safe and effective fire to landowners enrolled in NRCS

conservation programs. NICHES is also lucky to have our Executive Director, Shannon Stanis, and our Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator, Sam Cody, as active prescribed fire crew members. Shannon renews their red card every year, and Sam is going through the process of completing the S-130/S-190 fire training and will get his first red card certification in 2024.

NICHES prescribed fire program is actively looking to keep our operations as much in the fully dormant season as possible. This spring, NICHES staff and volunteers implemented 9 prescribed burns on NICHES preserves between December 14th and March 13th, covering 508.5 acres.

We take pride in getting our prescribed fires done safely, effectively, and in harmony with surrounding neighbors and local officials, and we were able to do that once again to continue building skills and relationships as we move this important program forward.

-NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter
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NICHES FIRE HISTORY (2014-2024)

Tracking a decade of prescribed fire management

Between Spring 2014 and Spring 2024, NICHES has conducted 140 controlled burns totaling 4,887 acres. By bringing fire back into these habitats we help to manage invasive species, recycle nutrients, and promote overall ecosystem health.



NICHES Welcomes Ann and Becki!



NICHES Development Director, Ann Fields Monical
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Hello, dear readers! I am glad to finally introduce myself as the new Development Director at NICHES. I may be a familiar face as I grew up on a farm in northern Tippecanoe County and am an alumna of Harrison High School and Purdue. I grew up appreciating the land – thanks to my family and to Bill Nye the Science Guy. As a budding environmentalist, I planted trees and pulled garlic mustard as part of Battle Ground Middle School's Earth Club. I hold a master's degree from Indiana University's School of Public & Environmental Affairs, where I focused on cultural policy and nonprofit management. I worked in the arts for several years in Bloomington, Indianapolis, and Lafayette, and I have finally found a lovely new niche for my skills and passion!

Hi, I'm Becki Reibman and I'm excited to be joining the NICHES team as the organization's newest Administrative Assistant! I've always enjoyed being outside and have fond memories of hiking with my family as a child in New Jersey. I graduated with a BA in History from Duke University and subsequently began a career in academic publishing. Since then, I've survived a pandemic, moved to Indiana, and found refuge during tough times in my connection with Nature. Now, I enjoy living in Lafayette and I'm proud to use the skills developed from my prior experiences to support an organization whose mission is so close to my heart. In my free time I also teach yoga at 'Community Yoga' in Lafayette and make and sell pottery inspired by the natural world.



NICHES Administrative Assistant, Becki Reibman
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Professional Development

NICHES Land Trust's commitment to excellence in land stewardship and conservation is not just a goal but a journey of continuous learning and growth. We believe investing in the professional development of our staff enhances their individual capabilities and enriches our organization's collective expertise. On February 29 and March 1, NICHES Stewardship Staff attended a SAWW (Safety and Woods Worker Training) Program at the Warbler Ridge Conservation area in Charleston, IL. This training was focused on safe chainsaw handling and use procedures. Additionally, NICHES Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator, Sam Cody, is currently enrolled in a Red Card Certification Fire Training through Purdue University. Upon completion of this program Sam will become the fifth red-carded NICHES employee, bolstering our capacity to safely and effectively implement fire as a conservation tool.

In addition to structured training programs, NICHES staff frequently participate in workshops, symposiums, and conferences

tailored for land management professionals. On March 5th, NICHES Staff attended the "Advancing Ecological Restoration in the 21st Century" Conference in Bloomington hosted by Ecologic. At this event, NICHES Stewardship Director Bob Easter delivered a presentation focused on "Prioritizing Stewardship Practices to Improve Efficiency and Maximize Ecological Potential."

Looking ahead, NICHES staff are gearing up for the fifteenth annual meeting of the SER Midwest-Great Lakes Chapter. This gathering aims to highlight the crucial links between habitat restoration and ecosystem resiliency, emphasizing the importance of ecological and social connectivity. At the end of the meeting, participants will visit NICHES Fisher Oak Savanna Preserve to tour one of the highest diversity prairie restorations in the state.

As we continue to invest in the professional development of our team, we strive to uphold the highest standards of environmental stewardship and make a lasting impact on the communities we serve.

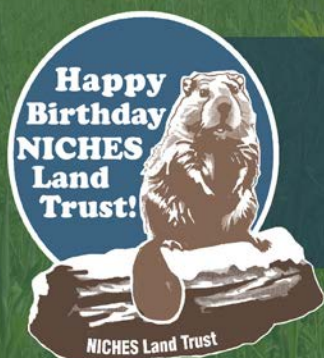


NICHES Staff Members attending an Ecological Restoration Conference in Bloomington (Pictured left to right: Justin Harmeson, Ann Fields Monical, Shannon Stanis, Becki Reibman, Bob Easter, Zach Neff, Sam Cody).

NICHES is Turning 29!

We have set a goal of raising \$10,000 to support NICHES' future during our annual Birthday Fundraiser. Thanks to a generous donor, gifts towards our goal will be matched! We invite you to help us celebrate by donating

and posting your own videos, memories, and photos of NICHES using #nicheslife. Join our 2024 Birthday Campaign, share why YOU support NICHES, and help us celebrate another year of local conservation work.



Join the celebration and support local conservation.

Annual Campaign Fund Drive
June 1 - 22, 2024

☒ **Mark Your Calendars:**

Join us in celebrating 29 years of Northern Indiana citizens helping ecosystems survive! Following the NICHES Annual Meeting on June 22, we will be hosting a birthday party from 3:00 – 5:00 pm.

The event will include birthday cake, ice cream, a potluck reception, and several guided hikes, including a smart phone photography walk with Zac Cody and a hike led by NICHES staff. Keep an eye on social media and our website for additional events and information!



**BIRTHDAY
CELEBRATION
JUNE 22**

Sponsored by



Our Community of Support

Notable named for a property, Black Rock rises over 100 feet above the Wabash River in Warren County. The 45-acre NICHES preserve is a popular site to visit and is also the namesake of a distinguished circle of supporters.

Members of The Black Rock Society recognize that a strong economy and high quality of life depend on the environment. The Black Rock Society is a group of generous individuals who invest in the future of NICHES through annual financial contributions exceeding \$1,000 and/or by donating, bargain selling, or planning to give land.

You can join this special group of citizens who help conserve Indiana's natural lands by supporting NICHES. Your gift shows a commitment to local conservation, and your legacy will provide opportunities for others to experience the wonders of the natural world. Members enjoy invitations to special events, including several exclusive property tours, and the annual Black Rock Society Dinner, which is scheduled for September 21, 2024.

For more information about joining The Black Rock Society, contact Development Director Ann Fields Monical at 765-423-1605.

Thank You to our Additional Sponsors!



*Isch Insurance Agency, The National Group,
Better Merchants, Edward Jones - Elliot Hartje*



NICHES Land Trust is honored to be the charity selected by Danielle "Nicci" Lee, who will be hiking the Appalachian Trail this spring and summer. The Appalachian Trail is a 2,190-mile trek from Georgia to Maine. Donations can be made for every mile hiked or they can be made at a flat rate. We are partnering with Nicci to help spread the word about this undertaking and hope you will cheer her along as she gives updates along her way. Visit (<https://nicheslandtrust.org/news/appalachian-trail-thru-hiker-raising-funds-for-niches>) to read more about Nicci's endeavor and to donate!



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