

THE SPROUT



NICHES LAND TRUST | SUMMER 2025 | VOLUME 29 ISSUE 2
Rooted in Wildcat Creek | Warren Prairie Sanctuary | 2024 Volunteer of the Year
"American Woodcock at Weiler Leopold" Cover art by NICHES Volunteer: Gabriela Sincich

"The privilege of possessing the earth entails the responsibility of passing it on, the better for our use, not only to immediate posterity, but to the Unknown Future" -Aldo Leopold

Executive Director Update

In the last edition of *The Sprout*, we began NICHES' 30th Birthday Celebration with a recounting of our 1995 incorporation as a nonprofit organization. NICHES is the culmination of a long history of conservation in West Central Indiana – a story that we will continue to share. This *Sprout* chronicles NICHES' roots in protecting beloved creeks with a special feature on how community conservationists saved the Wildcat.



At our 25th Anniversary celebration in 2020, a panel of NICHES founders shared stories from the organization's incorporation and early days.

With over 75,000 dams built on American rivers, we are fortunate today that efforts to save the creeks in our community were successful. The dams proposed on the Wildcat, Big Pine, and Sugar Creeks would have made a few rich in land development while destroying life in vibrant rivers. Future generations will know the beauty of these free-flowing river ecosystems because current and past generations fought to protect their wonder.

This issue of *The Sprout* also celebrates NICHES' protection of a restored prairie in the Big Pine Creek valley with the acceptance of a donated conservation easement. This area would have

been completely underwater had the dam effort been successful, reminding me that everything is connected and cycles of life and death are integral parts of nature. This protected restored prairie is also functioning as a conservation burial ground operated by the landowners, Warren Prairie Sanctuary (WPS). Departed loved ones are buried in the fertile soil, nourishing new life for the grasses, butterflies, birds, and bees. Conservation burials like this are a tradition as old as time. NICHES is grateful for this strategic partnership with WPS to offer this opportunity to the community. NICHES will provide our expertise protecting habitat while WPS manages the operational components of the burial ground.

We carry on the conservation legacy of all those that came before us. We walk in their footsteps. Here in West Central Indiana, we have a remarkable conservation legacy to continue. I think often about how to best express my personal gratitude to everyone that fought the dams, started/supported NICHES, donated land, and/or never gave up on natural areas. We discuss it often as a staff as our hearts are full of gratitude. NICHES' continued stewardship of native habitats is our most impactful way of expressing our gratitude for that legacy. Please join us June 21 for the Annual Meeting to celebrate these conservation successes and stewardship stories, share gratitude, and envision our future deeply connected with thriving natural areas.

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

Mark Your Calendars

Save the dates and join NICHES staff, friends, and volunteers at our upcoming stewardship, outreach, and organizational events!

JUNE

NICHES 30th Birthday Campaign Kickoff

**June 1st @ The Caretaker's Cottage,
1496 N. Salisbury St, West Lafayette
(2:00pm - 4:00pm)**

Join NICHES and the West Lafayette Public Library for a public reception to celebrate the 'Stewards of the Land' exhibit held in conjunction with the start of Great Outdoors Month and to kickstart NICHES' 30th Birthday Celebration. A brief talk about our community's conservation successes will be followed with light refreshments. This event is free to the public; registration is required. See NICHES website calendar for more details.

NICHES Annual Meeting

**June 21st @ Wright Forestry Center,
West Lafayette (1pm start)**

Join us for our Annual Membership Meeting and Birthday Celebration! We will vote on new board members, present 2024 financials, and share organizational updates.

JULY

Wabash Riverfest

July 12th: Tapawingo Park (9:00 am - 4:00 pm)

Every summer, the Wabash Riverfest unites the Greater Lafayette community in a celebration of the longest free-flowing river in the eastern United States. Join NICHES and our local conservation partners for float trips, art classes, fishing lessons, canoe races, and much more as we explore and appreciate Indiana's magnificent Wabash River. This event is free to the public and great for all ages.

Electrofishing Event

(Members Only)

**July 19th @ Martell Forest
(11:00 am - 1:00 pm)**

Explore stream health and biodiversity through hands-on activities like electrofishing and species sampling. Registration is required.

Wildflower Walk

(Members Only)

**July 25th @ Granville Sand Barrens
(10:00 am - 12:00 pm)**

Join NICHES board member Kent Walters for a guided hike through NICHES Granville Sand Barrens preserve. Enjoy the beauty of this rare sand barrens habitat and learn about the native wildflowers that call it home.

"Awe" Mindfulness Hike

July 26th- Hike @ Crow's Grove (9 pm start)

NICHES Land Trust invites you to the next installment in our quarterly Mindfulness Hike Series, presented in partnership with A Work in Progress Faith Community and Heart & Soul Farm. Our Summer "Awe" Themed Hike will marvel at the magic of fireflies and feature a presentation from local entomologist, Tom Turpin. This event is free, but registration is required.

AUGUST

Creek Hike Series

**August 2nd @ Wright Rock Creek (10 am-12 pm)
August 30th @ Crow's Grove (10 am-12 pm)**

Join NICHES Land Trust's Stewardship Director, Bob Easter, for our Summer Creek Hike Series! Explore the beauty of Indiana's creeks while learning about local ecosystems, stream ecology, and NICHES conservation efforts.

Rooted in Wildcat Creek

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed constructing three reservoirs in the Middle Wabash region by damming the Wildcat, Big Pine, and Sugar Creeks. The project aimed to address flood control, general recreation, and fish and wildlife recreation. However, the initiative was met with fierce local opposition.

Community members rallied together, organizing decades of resistance against the proposed dams. Their collective efforts, fueled by steadfast determination, ultimately culminated in a hard-fought victory. The State of Indiana deauthorized the dams in 1977, and in 1990 Congress followed suit, marking the official end of the project.

Collaborative efforts to prevent the dams led to the formation of several organizations. A key group was the Wildcat Creek Federation, led by Connie Wick and comprised of paddlers, conservationists, and farmers. Their mission was to end congressional funding for the dam projects. Their community organizing created a constant presence with legislators, which had a profound impact on stopping the dam on the Wildcat. Their petition opposing the Wildcat dam had over 20,000 signatures.

Another key group was The Wildcat Creek Foundation (WCF), which was incorporated in 1974 to acquire and publicize public access sites/parks along the stream corridor. Its mission was to provide

an alternate plan to the reservoir through a series of preserved and stewarded natural parks and public access points along the creek for recreation. The group acquired 8 properties along the Wildcat, 1 lease for public access, and several conservation easements. Persis Newman was instrumental in the growth and development of WCF, helping to establish and govern the organization through board service. In 2013, WCF merged with NICHES Land Trust and their assets came under NICHES's permanent protection. More information about these efforts, dedicated people, and the merger can be found on NICHES's YouTube channel.



Persis Newman, a leader in the fight against the Wildcat Creek Dam Project, was instrumental in the founding of The Wildcat Creek Foundation and later NICHES Land Trust.

NICHES Land Trust was founded and nurtured by the dedicated individuals who opposed and ultimately prevented the construction of these dams. In 1994, Persis was active at the keystone meeting with Harry Potter and Susan Ulrich about establishing a local land trust that

led directly to NICHES's incorporation (story shared in the Q1 2025 Sprout). She also contributed significantly to the merger with WCF and remained a steadfast supporter throughout NICHES's history until her passing earlier this year. Many past and present NICHES board members were active in the organized opposition to these dams, including board service to key groups that kept these beautiful creeks freely flowing. Of course, general members and supporters have contributed generously to both efforts. Today NICHES protects over 120 acres along Wildcat Creek.



Stickers and buttons tell the story of a community united against the proposed Wildcat Creek Dam.

As you paddle the creeks and admire their scenic beauty, please join us in gratitude for the natural wonders of the world and all those involved in their preservation.

The Wildcat Voyage of Discovery By: Birt Stevens

I've seen the powers that you possess. I've seen you rise up from spring thunderstorms. Your fast-moving water flows at a pace that can uproot large trees and relocate them downstream wherever it pleases.

I have also seen you in a different light. I have camped on your banks under a moonlit sky, falling asleep while listening to the sounds of your flow and to the many frogs that also enjoy your slow-moving water.

Wildcat, you are more than a winding little creek. You are one of a few of Indiana's scenic waterways.

A river home to many. You add beauty to our Indiana landscape. Some with money and a lust for greed wanted more. To place concrete and steel across your path. A large, fake lake. Wildcat reservoir they would say.

They were stopped by those that knew best, that loved you more. May you never stop flowing freely. Keep your water flowing through the cities to small towns. We know that you have been abused by a few, but you are loved by so many.



Thanks to the dedication of those who fought to protect Wildcat Creek, NICHES Adventure Camp participants get to enjoy its waters every summer.

From Adam's Mill to Peter's Mill

Wildcat Creek offers a great local opportunity for paddling through part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Sections of 3 streams in Indiana fall under this national designation including portions of the Blue River in southern Indiana, Cedar Creek in northeast Indiana and a 38-mile section of the Wildcat Creek in Carroll and Tippecanoe Counties from Burlington to the Wabash River.

NICHES protects 7 properties through the scenic section of the Wildcat. 6 of these properties were transferred to NICHES during the merger with the Wildcat Creek Foundation and we are honored to protect them. The 7th is our headquarters at Clegg Memorial Gardens. You can paddle from Adam's Mill to Peter's Mill Landing to visit them all.

The Oxbow at Adam's Mill was initially protected by the Wildcat Creek Foundation. Adam's mill is a great boat launch site that also offers tent camping, primitive cabins, and educational opportunities. If you put a boat in at Adam's Mill you can complete a relaxing day trip to DNR's access site at Knop Lake. The first NICHES property you will encounter on this float is Mussel Shoals, about 5 miles downstream from the historic mill. Mussel Shoals is named for its fantastic freshwater mussel diversity with 22 species encountered on a single visit to the site in 2014. Mussel Shoals features spacious gravel bars to stop and stretch your legs. Wildlife and plant diversity is rich with bald eagles, kingfishers, blue herons and many songbird species

a common sight and chances to catch a glimpse of a green heron, black-crowned night heron and even osprey. Beaver, muskrat, and river otter are also frequently encountered.

The banks of the creek in the summer feature the blossoms of buttonbush and elderberry shrubs and an ever-evolving display of wildflowers including the native garden phlox, monkeyflower, swamp milkweed, blue vervain, tall bellflower, false-sunflower, brown-eyed Susan, and cut-leaf coneflower.

Paddling another 6 miles will take you by NICHES' 4-acre Heron Bottoms which features another type of habitat found along the Wildcat, seepage wetland. These wetlands are important for filtering water entering the creek and host a unique set of species including buttonbush, lizard's tail, blue flag iris, skunk cabbage, fowl manna grass, rice cutgrass, ostrich fern and *Carex frankii*. Heron Bottoms is an excellent breeding site for amphibians and softshell turtles are often seen on the banks in the area.

A couple more miles down the creek you will reach the DNR's Knop Lake access site where you can take out your boat. Floating Adam's Mill to Knop Lake is about 13.6 miles and generally takes about 5-7 hours to complete.

If you wanted to start your journey from the Knop Lake access site, you could enjoy a shorter 3-5-hour float covering 9.3 miles to the Mis-So-La access, which NICHES leases from a private landowner. This section of the creek is great for paddling, fishing, and wildlife encounters. Almost immediately after pushing off from Knop Lake access you will pass by

NICHES' 24-acre McAllister Woods with $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile of frontage on river right including a buffer of hardwood forest that is consistent with this section of the creek.

McAllister woods includes typical floodplain tree species like silver maple and sycamore but also has a good presence of oaks with mature bur, black and red oak. Mating box turtles have been observed on the property and woodcock chicks spotted on the upland edge with the adjacent farm field.

Another mile downstream will take you through NICHES' 36-acre Sixbey preserve where we protect wooded sections on both sides of the stream for $\frac{1}{2}$ mile including bottomland and upland woods, ravines, and seep springs. The woods to river left include significant seepage areas with fantastic sedge cover, buttonbush, blue-flag iris, skunk cabbage and many other species unique to this habitat. As you reach the next bend in the creek toward the west edge of Sixbey there is a gravel bar to river right with a striking steep bank revealing the soil layers and dens of the swallows to the left at the bend, which forces the river to the north.

This section of the creek is great for fishing with smallmouth bass, rock bass, white bass, catfish, sauger and multiple panfish species.

About another 6 miles downstream you can take your boat out at the Mis-So-Lah access site.

The next stretch of the creek between Mis-So-Lah and NICHES' Peter's Mill Landing is 7.5 miles and takes about 3-5 hours to paddle depending on water levels. About 2 miles into this section,

you will encounter the triple-drop rapids, an exciting riffle section where the flow of the stream is increased. Another 2.5 miles downstream the south fork joins the main stem of the Wildcat and nearly doubles in flow and width.

Wildlife through this section continues to impress with bald eagles, green herons, catbirds, indigo buntings, sandpipers, barred owls, wood ducks, mallards, redtail and red shouldered hawks, and ruby throated hummingbirds often visiting dense patches of jewelweed and the diminutive-flowered figwort.

A little over a mile past the confluence of the south fork and the main channel of the Wildcat there is an interesting feature of the creek where an oxbow was recently bypassed by the flow of the creek, demonstrating the wild movements of a meandering free flowing stream.

After passing the Eisenhower Bridge, the takeout at Peter's Mill Landing is on river left with wooden steps leading out of the creek to the parking lot. NICHES' headquarters at Clegg Gardens is on the opposite side of the creek here.

If paddling is not your thing, Clegg Gardens offers miles of trails overlooking the Wildcat from high on the ridge among gravel hill prairie species, to seepage wetlands near the stream and offers a wide variety of habitats to explore which represent the Wildcat Creek valley. NICHES is honored to protect sections of the scenic Wildcat Creek and carry on the legacy of those that fought hard to keep this creek freely flowing. We are actively looking to expand our preserves in this special area to serve the wild features of the stream and connect people to nature.

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



NICHES Summer Adventure Campers on Wildcat Creek. *Photo by: Sam Cody*



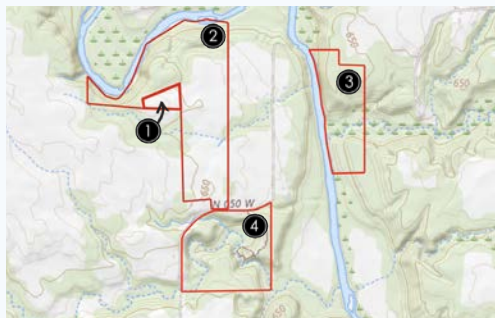
Warren Prairie Sanctuary

Last fall, NICHES accepted a donation of a conservation easement (CE) over 3.4 acres in Warren County from Warren Prairie Sanctuary, Inc. (WPS). WPS is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization with a mission to provide an environmentally sustainable form of interment, where the body is returned to the earth to decompose naturally and support the regeneration of new life. WPS is also dedicated to environmental education, building community, and providing family support to all who are interested in an alternative to conventional burial processes.

Affectionately known as 'The Cemeprairie,' this 3.4-acre burial ground features a restored Indiana prairie and is perched high above a scenic oxbow of Big Pine Creek. This easement is contiguous with another CE that NICHES holds with Warren Piece Co. on an additional 65 acres of restored prairie, woodland, and wetland habitat. These two CEs are located near NICHES's fee owned properties, Crow's Grove, Honey Branch Bluff, Swanson's Bluff, and Fall Creek Gorge, all of which are part of a larger 535-acre matrix of protected habitat in the Big Pine Valley.

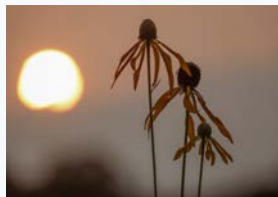
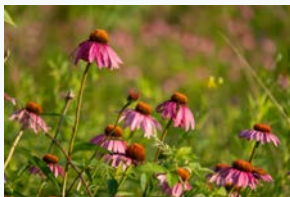
The Cemeprairie features a rich tapestry of native vegetation including grasses such as little bluestem, prairie cordgrass, and Indian grass. Native prairie wildflowers are present throughout, including milkweed species,

mountain mints, bee balm, coneflowers, queen of the prairie, and ironweed. We are grateful to The Whistler Foundation and WPS for their generosity in contributing to the stewardship endowment of this CE, ensuring its long-term support and care.



1. NICHES Warren Prairie Sanctuary CE
2. NICHES Warren Piece CE
3. Honey Branch Bluff
4. Crow's Grove

NICHES' partnership with WPS is historic and establishes the Cemeprairie as the first conservation burial ground in the state of Indiana. We are proud to help provide this opportunity for natural burial to our community. NICHES will protect the prairie via the CE and steward the land cooperatively with WPS members, and WPS will manage the burial details. As this initiative develops, NICHES is excited to work with other land trusts to help make conservation burial a more accessible option in the state. This partnership provides a beautiful opportunity for NICHES members, as well as the general public, to have their final resting place forever protected by NICHES.



If you or someone you know is interested in conservation burial, or you would like to learn more, please reach out to WPS via their website www.warrenprairiesanctuary.org.
(Photo Credits: Brooke Sauter and Zac Cody)

Volunteer & Outreach Highlights

On January 26th, NICHES kicked off its 2025 outreach events with a "Hibernation"-themed Mindfulness Hike at our Moyer Gould Preserve in Carroll County. This hike is part of an ongoing quarterly series in collaboration with A Work in Progress Faith Community and Heart & Soul Farm designed to inspire participants to connect deeply with nature and to observe its transformation through the seasons.



On February 1st, NICHES held its largest-ever annual hunter potluck. In 2024, hunters volunteered over 2,000 hours and harvested a record 168 deer across 3,378 acres, with an impressive doe-to-buck ratio of 2.29 to 1, aligning with our goal to reduce deer populations and protect biodiversity.

On February 4th, NICHES staff joined conservationists across the state for the Indiana Land Protection Alliance Winter Conference in Indianapolis. The event included a variety of Outreach, Governance, and Technology themed workshop sessions.



On February 14th, NICHES hosted a hike at our Cranberry Marsh Easement for Black Rock Society Members. It was led by our Stewardship Director Bob Easter. This site is known for having the largest amount of open water in Warren County (80+ acres).

On February 15th, NICHES Members gathered at Purdue's Aquatic Research Lab for a special outreach event celebrating Indiana's largest salamander, the Hellbender! The event included a documentary screening of "Hellbender in the Blue" with its director Katelyn Calhoun. Participants also got a chance to tour Purdue's Hellbender Rearing Lab and see live individuals being raised for release in Southern Indiana.





On March 1 and 2, NICHES partnered with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association to host a Maple Sugaring Event at Fort Ouiatenon. The event featured family-friendly activities, living history reenactments, interactive educational stations, and real maple syrup treats! The event raised almost \$2,000 for NICHES conservation efforts and brought in over 700 participants.

On March 21st and 22nd, NICHES hosted a Woodcock Walk series with local naturalist Karen Cody. Highlights included spotting several male American woodcocks engaged in their aerial mating "sky dance." Participants learned about the habitat needs of American woodcocks and how NICHES conservation efforts, including prescribed fire, support their populations.



Between January 29th and March 18th, NICHES conducted 5 prescribed burns that covered over 352 acres of habitat. NICHES Stewardship Staff carefully plan each burn to maximize ecological benefits and help maintain and restore our native ecosystems. Fire helps control invasive species, enriches soil nutrients, and promotes the growth of native plants that wildlife depend on. NICHES collaborates with volunteers and conservation partners to safely implement burns and promote fire as a conservation tool.

On April 3rd, NICHES hosted Indiana Governor Mike Braun, Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA) representatives, and local volunteers for a hike at our Holley Savanna Nature Preserve in Newton County. Attendees participated in a conversation about NICHES regional stewardship efforts and were treated to a nesting great blue heron!



On April 12th, NICHES collaborated with Warren Piece Co. to host a Full Moon Prairie Hike on NICHES Warren Piece Easement in Warren County. Participants of all ages enjoyed a guided hike featuring nighttime-themed conservation stations, opportunities to observe calling amphibians and fairy shrimp, and a campfire with s'mores to conclude the evening.

2024 Volunteer of the Year

NICHES Land Trust is honored to recognize Bill Arthur as our 2024 Volunteer of the Year! Since joining the board in 2015, Bill has made significant contributions to the organization's growth, operations, and community outreach. His commitment to environmental conservation, practical leadership, and his seemingly limitless well of energy and enthusiasm has been instrumental in advancing NICHES' mission over the past decade.

As Board President from 2022 to 2024, Bill led the organization through key milestones. During his tenure, NICHES expanded its land holdings by several hundred acres, completed the accreditation process to ensure best practices, and implemented governance reforms to strengthen operations. Bill also played a vital role in improving the organization's financial health, supporting greater stability and long-term planning.

As someone who likes to dive into projects and get their hands dirty, Bill's involvement extends far beyond administrative leadership. He is an active member of the Clegg Trail Crew, using his engineering experience to build and maintain bridges and staircases that improve access to NICHES properties. He also mentors Purdue's EPICS engineering students on conservation-focused projects, enhancing the public's ability to explore and appreciate these natural spaces.

Bill's impact on conservation is not limited to NICHES. Since 2014, he has been involved with Tree Lafayette, serving in roles like Treasurer and Executive Director. During his time with the organization, over 4,600 trees have been planted in Greater Lafayette, enhancing urban forestry and environmental education in our local community.

Perhaps Bill's simplest yet most meaningful contribution is the human touch he brings to sharing and celebrating NICHES' mission. If you've become a NICHES member in the past decade, you've likely received a personal call from Bill, thanking you and welcoming you into our conservation community.

We invite you to join us on June 21st for our Annual Meeting at Martell Forest to return this sentiment and thank Bill for his lasting impact on the organization and the community we serve.



Give the Gift of Conservation

30 years ago, the founders of NICHES Land Trust were people like you. Forward-thinking, generous, and hoping the best for our future. They envisioned a community that was verdant and vibrant, thriving both ecologically and economically.

Members like you are our best advocates! You help us protect land, restore wildlife habitats, and connect people to nature. You also help us build up a community that values the environment and our region's natural heritage.

During this special 30th anniversary celebration, we hope you will consider referring your friends or gifting a membership to help grow our circle of support. As a special token of our gratitude, we will gift you and your friend a limited edition set of 'Friend of Nature' stickers.

Join the NICHES Friend Drive and help us reach our goal of 300 new members by the end of 2025. Complete the Gift Membership Form on the back page of this edition of The Sprout or visit nicheslandtrust.org/friends to learn more.

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

Celebrate 30 years with us! Refer a friend or gift a membership, and both of you will receive a limited edition set of 'Friend of Nature' stickers!



Thank You to our Sponsors!



Candoor Payroll, Driggs & Associates, Duke Energy, Isch Insurance Agency, Elliot Hartje - Edward Jones Investments, Isch Insurance Agency, Lafayette Noon Optimists, Purdue Federal Credit Union.

Join the NICHES Friend Drive!

During our 30th anniversary celebration, we invite you to gift a membership to help grow our circle of support.

Learn more at nicheslandtrust.org/friends



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Message to Recipient (optional)

Please detach and return using the remittance envelope included in this issue of The Sprout!

