

# Notes from the Field

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Photo by Zach Grycan

Laura Helmich, NLI Stewardship Technician, holds a fox snake (*Pantherophis vulpinus*).

## Reptile Monitoring

By Laura Helmich, Stewardship Technician

The Nygren Wetland Preserve in Rockton, Illinois is home to many species of reptiles and amphibians, but more research is needed to identify which species are present on our preserves and the relative abundance of those species.

It doesn't matter if we are talking about turtles, snakes, frogs, toads, lizards, or salamanders; all of these animals play a very important role in our ecosystems. They eat "pests" such as mice and insects and they are also important sources of food for birds and other predators. Also, the more we know about which species call Nygren Wetland "home" the better we can manage our preserves with the needs of all the inhabitants in mind.

To that end, I have started a couple projects to monitor reptile populations. The first



Photo by Laura Helmich

Northern water snake (*Nerodia sipedon*).

thing I did was to utilize donated plywood to make "snake boards". This is a very easy way to monitor snake populations. Since all reptiles and amphibians are ectothermic (cold-blooded), they need to use the sun to help them regulate their body temperature. So far this summer I have placed snake boards on four of our preserves and recorded five species of snakes using them. The longer the boards remain in place on the

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Photo by Laura Helmich



Tyler Pellegrini recently wrestled this giant common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) with a shell measuring 36 cm from a trap.



## Reptile Monitoring *continued*

preserves, the more snakes will use them. I am also hopeful that I might eventually find lizards or salamanders using them as well.

Photo by Laura Helmrich



Milk snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*).

The second monitoring method I am utilizing is turtle traps. So far

we've caught 14 painted turtles, one spiny softshell, and five snapping turtles, and we only started trapping a few months ago. We utilize a mark and release method so that we might eventually be able to estimate population size, as well as which different species inhabit our sites.

All of the monitoring methods I will use are catch and release, and are designed to limit the amount of stress put on any animal. I hope to implement additional research methods in the future, including frog/toad calling surveys.

But, as it turns out, sometimes all the trapping and fancy monitoring techniques are insignificant compared



Photo by Laura Helmrich

Garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*).

to just being out and about in the preserves and paying close attention to what (and who) is around you! Read Tyler's piece about Blanding's turtles to see what I mean.

## Mission Emydoidea, landing a Blanding's

By Tyler Pellegrini, Restoration Ecologist

You never know what you might come across while exploring NLI's preserves. In May I was out on a hike scouting for native plants when I happened to stumble upon an endangered Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*) just sitting there out in the open.

With the assistance from our friends at the Boone County Conservation District, we affixed a radio transmitter to the male turtle's shell, and since then we've been tracking him with a receiver and antenna to gather location data on his core range.

Blanding's turtles are endangered throughout much of their native range in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. and, therefore, are very rare. We're hopeful that this Blanding's

Photo by Connor McClelland



Tyler Pellegrini holds a Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*) before he releases it with a transmitter.

turtle will lead us to his overwintering habitat and a previously undiscovered population of more turtles.

This discovery not only tells us that our preserve has high quality

habitat to support a Blanding's turtle, but also underscores the philosophy of land managers that it's vital to seek out and protect those last remaining undeveloped properties that still exist, no matter how small.



Photo by Laura Helmrich

Aaron Minson, Boone County Conservation District, helps affix a radio transmitter to a Blanding's turtle held by Tyler Pellegrini.



Photo by Tyler Pellegrini

**M**y name is Connor McClelland and I am NLI's AmeriCorps Service Member this summer. I started in June and will be completing 450 hours, wrapping up in late August to early September.

I have been helping Zach, Tyler, and Laura with seed collection and invasive management, as well as numerous other conservation activities in order to uphold the quality of NLI's numerous preserves.

I grew up in Rockford and spent most of my childhood attending camps at Severson Dells. I attribute my love for nature and conservation to my late grandfather, Lowell Edwards, who inspired me to always love and protect our natural resources.

This fall I will be going into my senior year at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, where I am engaged in numerous extracurricular activities. I am double majoring in Environmental Science and Secondary Education.

After graduation this coming spring it is my plan to move out to Seattle where I will find a job in education and hopefully attend the University of Washington to earn a Master's degree in forestry or restoration ecology while teaching.

I am incredibly thankful to Ann Wasser of Severson Dells Nature Center for connecting me with the AmeriCorps program as well as to NLI for hosting me this summer and giving me a great hands on work experience.

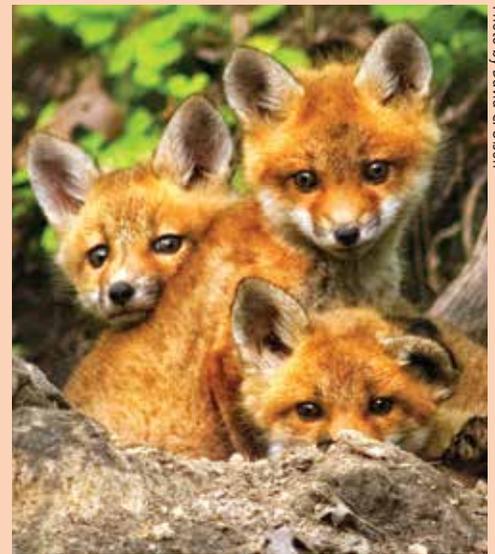


Photo by David C. Olson

Red fox kits.

## Make a Big Impact on Habitat Protection

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 by email at [jkennay@naturalland.org](mailto:jkennay@naturalland.org)  
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## Volunteering for Land Stewardship

Since mid-March NLI's volunteer land stewardship days have been on hold due to the pandemic. However, as we gear up for the time when we can re-open our weekly and monthly volunteer days we want to encourage you to consider coming out and helping at one of the preserves soon.

Lee Bach, from the Wednesday Volunteer Crew at Nygren Wetland Preserve, says, "You never know what you're going to do and learn. I have made new friends and had a lot of fun. Since I started a few years ago I have learned a lot like how to operate tools and equipment, names of plants and birds, and I even helped rebuild the barn office. I never did those kinds of things before I became a volunteer."

Lee encourages anyone who has an interest in working outside to join him and the others and if you

### Facebook Live Events



Watch for periodic Facebook Live events held at NLI preserves in the coming months on Natural Land Institute's Facebook page.



Photo by Kent Wolfe

Volunteers Lee Bach, Loren Schafer, and Bob Ramirez with Zach Grycan, Director of Stewardship.

don't know how to do something you can learn along the way.

If you're not already on our email newsletter list send a message to [info@naturalland.org](mailto:info@naturalland.org) to request that your name and email address be added to it so you are notified when the volunteer days start.

### *Where and when are the Volunteer Land Stewardship Days?*

**Burr Oak Valley Preserve:** First Saturday (9 a.m. – 3 p.m.) and Every Thursday (9 a.m. – Noon);  
**Silver Creek Woods Preserve:** Third Saturday (9 a.m. – 3 p.m.);  
**Nygren Wetland Preserve:** Every

Wednesday (9 a.m. – 3 p.m.);  
**William & Gayle Keefer Reserve:** Fourth Friday (9 a.m. – Noon); and days vary at **Howard D. Colman Dells Nature Preserve.**

### Stewardship Wish List

ATV 4-Wheel or 6-Wheel  
Tractor 100hp+  
Construction materials  
Metal shelving • Rope/chain  
Banquet tables  
Large event tent • Tools  
Plastic arm chairs