NATURAL LAND INSTITUTE
Conserving Land in Northern Illinois

Notes from the Field

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Photo by Tyler Pellegrini

The increased restoration efforts from volunteers at Kyte River Bottoms will benefit the ideal habitat for Blanding's turtles, a State Endangered species. Tyler found this abandoned Blanding's shell on a recent visit there.

Photo by Tyler Pellegrini

Oaks stand majestic in the area cleared of invasive brush at Carpenter Woods Preserve.

Giving local prairies and woodlands a fighting chance

Ogle County Stewardship

If you wander around Ogle County, you'll note a few well known keystone preserves and natural areas like **Castle Rock State Park** and **Lowden-Miller State Forest**. NLI has direct ties to Castle Rock as we helped raise money to protect the land there in 1964 and 710 acres inside the 2,000 acre State Park are designated as the *George B. Fell Nature Preserve*, named after NLI's founder. These two state sites have been designated by the **National Audubon Society** as **Important Bird Areas** because of the "impressive variety of rare breeding warblers and other songbirds" (Audubon.org) that nest there.

But, what many people may not be so familiar with are two Natural Land Institute preserves within 3 miles as the birds fly: The **Kyte River Bottoms Land and Water Reserve** and the **Carpenter Woods Preserve**.

Caring for the land, as you know, is an ongoing effort and these two special places have been in need of attention. Now, thanks to a new community partnership with local volunteers, these two special areas will get a much-needed boost to restore critical habitat for Red-headed Woodpeckers and Cerulean Warblers.

The 235-acre **Kyte River Bottoms Land and Water Reserve**, southeast of Oregon, is comprised of primarily floodplain forest surrounding the Kyte River. The land was acquired in 2003 by NLI with a C2000 grant

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and registered as a Land and Water Reserve with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission in 2004. This land is one that conveys an almost forgotten beauty with its extensive forested floodplain and its network of oxbow lakes and meander scars depicting the Kyte River's history. Spacious oak-hickory woodlands and savanna provide important pockets of native sedge meadow and prairie.

Much of the floodplain acreage is difficult to access when the water levels are high; something that's occurring in greater frequency due to extreme weather events. This has made management a challenge, with invasive species such as bush honeysuckle and multiflora rose pushing out native grasses important for nesting birds and butterflies such as skippers.

The timing of the locally-led volunteer work couldn't be better. Together, with NLI staff, we will be reclaiming much of this land from invasives to help multiple threatened and endangered wildlife species like Blanding's turtles and Black-billed Cuckoos thrive.

Photo by Jill Kennay

This sign commemorates the dedication of 710 acres of high quality area inside Castle Rock State Park designated as an Illinois Nature Preserve.

The new partnership will also help manage increasing grazing stress from overpopulation of white-tailed deer by ethically hunting deer as part of the management plan. White-tailed deer management in natural areas is critical to prevent over browsing of sensitive native plant populations. This is especially important when surrounding habitat is being hunted, leaving a refuge for a population of deer to graze areas down, which gives invasive species more opportunity to invade.

Northwest of the Kyte River Bottoms is **Carpenter Woods Preserve**. Only 5 acres in size, this small but mighty conservation area represents important habitat of oak sand forest and abuts a larger expanse of privately owned woodlands just west of Oregon.

Photo by Jill Kennay

To learn more about the history of NLI's impact in Ogle County the Board of Trustees took a tour of Castle Rock State Park and the George B. Fell Nature Preserve in 2008.

There you will find majestic oaks and shagbark hickories along with a diverse mix of beautiful native spring ephemeral flowers covering the forest floor in the spring once the snow is gone.

The land was generously donated to NLI by the estate of Thelma Carpenter in 1995. Thelma was well known in Oregon's history for her dedication and service as the librarian at the Oregon Library for 32 years and her passion for prairies and natural areas. In addition to Carpenter Woods, the nearby Nachusa Grasslands has a management unit named in her honor.

Here too, as in other regions, invasive plant species are increasing at a time when native plants and animals need ample places to raise their young and shelter from increasing extreme weather variations.

Thank you to the volunteers who are helping to reclaim these special places. These preserves are not open to the public. The best way to see and experience them is to assist at a volunteer restoration day. If you'd like to help, please email Tyler Pellegrini (tpellegrini@naturalland.org) or call him at 815/970-5012. This summer is a great time to make a difference.

Woah, YOU did it!

William & Gayle Keefer Nature Reserve Update

By Tyler Pellegrini

Have you heard the wonderful news about NLI's William and Gayle Keefer Nature Reserve in Rockton? Thanks to the dedication of our volunteers who got their hands dirty removing invasive species from the Keefer Reserve last year, we just reached our goal of 400 volunteer stewardship hours in January 2022! This achievement unlocked another chunk of funds from the **Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation's** "Community Stewardship Challenge Grant."

Photo by Joel Neylon

Good news. A Pileated woodpecker was seen at Keefer Nature Reserve last November by our bird surveyor Joel Neylon. This is the largest woodpecker species in the U.S. and not common in our area; conserving woodlands is critical to their survival.

Combined with the generous donations from the spring 2021 fundraising campaign, this grant has so far provided $37,000 for habitat restoration work at the Keefer Reserve. Thanks to YOU, these funds have helped us purchase a batwing mower, herbicide, fuel for running our chainsaws and skid steer, and seed. The funds also enabled us to hire a contractor to perform bird surveys, and they've reported 69 species observed so far.

Photo by Judy Barnard

A big thank you to new volunteers Mike Houston (L) and Ian Golec (R), who helped Laura Helmich, NLI's Stewardship Technician (middle), remove invasive brush during a restoration day at Keefer Nature Reserve.

Besides the many thank yous we owe our volunteers and donors, we could not have reached this goal without the dedication of our Stewardship Technician, Laura Helmich. Laura spent many hours organizing and leading weekly volunteer restoration days at the Keefer Reserve the past year, recruited several new dedicated volunteers, and cleared a lot of brush and trees in the process. More work is needed. Call Laura at 712/301-1208 to help.

Become Involved ■ *NLI Restoration Days Schedule*

Call or email staff or the site steward for more information and to confirm your participation. Work for as long as your schedule allows or for the whole time listed. Wear sturdy boots and dress for the weather in layers. Dates and times subject to change.

Location	Schedule	Staff/Site Steward
Burr Oak Valley Nature Preserve	First Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. — 1:00 p.m. Every Thursday, 9:00 a.m. — Noon	Staff: Tyler Pellegrini 815/970-5012, tpellegrini@naturalland.org Site Steward: Position Open
Howard D. Colman Dells Nature Preserve	Days Vary 9:00 a.m — 3:00 p.m. Ask to be added to email notifications.	Site Steward: Chris Reisetter reisetterc@gmail.com 815/985-7208
Silver Creek Woods Preserve	Third Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. — 1:00 p.m.	Site Steward: Dion Faith, 815/520-6916 DocFaith68@yahoo.com
Nygren Wetland Preserve	Every Wednesday, 9:00 a.m. — 3:00 p.m.	Staff: Tyler Pellegrini, Site Steward: Position Open
William & Gayle Keefer Nature Reserve	Every Wednesday 1:00 p.m. — 4:00 p.m.	Staff: Laura Helmich 712/301-1208, lhelmich@naturalland.org Site Steward: Position Open

Heritage LandKeepers Stories

Editor's Note: Heritage LandKeepers are the landowners of properties that NLI holds a conservation easement on. Their stories provide insight into what moves them to protect their land. The following story includes excerpts from the 2021 annual summary for the Mary Sackett Prairie in northwestern Winnebago County. To read the full summary visit: https://www.naturalland.org/heritage-landkeepers/ or request a printed copy be mailed to you by contacting the NLI office at 815/964-6666. The 45 page 2021 management report for the Mary Sackett Prairie is also available online to read in the website link above. If you are a Heritage LandKeeper and have a story to share please send it to info@naturalland.org and we will share it on our website or in a future print publication as space allows.

Continuing a Legacy of Love
The Mary Sackett Prairie

Imagine being given land, a prairie recreated from the descriptive writings found in an 1840s journal by a little girl named Mary Sackett, and accepting the grave responsibility of continuing a family legacy to preserve and protect that treasured landscape.

Mary Sackett Prairie, located in Laona Township in northwestern Winnebago County, has a conservation easement on it that is held by Natural Land Institute.

That's exactly what happened to Andrew H. Williams and his wife, Rebecca Christoffel, on March 1, 2019 when they became the owners of the Mary Sackett Prairie. It was a gift from George Johnson, whose family owned their farm since 1895. George is the one who found Mary's journal and was inspired in 2003 to begin recreating 26.5 acres of land on his family farm into a prairie of abundant wildflowers where birds, frogs and insects would thrive.

A Henslow's sparrow perched on a birdbath captured on a wildlife camera.

Andrew said in his 2021 Mary Sackett Prairie Summary Report, "We are very grateful to George for his fabulous gift to us! We visited Mary Sackett Prairie many times since then (2019) and sent frequent emails to various interested parties with titles like "MSP notes 21-06-30" that tell about the activities and findings while engaged with caring for this special place.

Rebecca Christoffel and Andrew H. Williams

Andrew's report includes a list of the numerous people who helped him and Rebecca and what they did, as well as detailed descriptions about several efforts throughout the year such as prescribed burns, mowing, and herbicides; increasing the seed rain; decreasing the weed rain; herbaceous weed management; woody weed management; soil rehabilitation; vertebrates; and invertebrates.

The vertebrates section talks about the close records they keep of the mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians that they encounter on the prairie. They were able to keep track of the creatures because they put out a birdbath in April and a wildlife camera that recorded the visitors to it. He said, "the most brilliant highlight of 2021 was surely catching on camera a Henslow's sparrow at our birdbath on August 2." He pointed out in his report that this bird "is a prairie conservation icon and we are thrilled to have it recorded here!

Andrew Williams said, "Catching a rough-legged hawk on camera in our carrion yard on November 3 is also very special."

An overhead shot of Mary Sackett Prairie is available on Google Earth by searching 42.45772N 089.31058W.

"One or both of us visited the prairie 154 times in 2021, which amounts to more than 15,000 miles driven," said Andrew at the end of his summary. "I also drove some distance engaged in seed collecting. We used expensive herbicides. We fueled and maintained mowing equipment. We bought tools. We bought expensive prairie seeds to sow. We rented a storage unit just for Mary Sackett Prairie related materials - mowers, seeds, tools - because we have no storage facility at the prairie.

"This is not an inexpensive project! But it is immensely gratifying and we are eager to keep doing this. We cannot recommend to you highly enough being outdoors, engaged in meaningful work, soaking up the beauty of nature in all its forms. In these troubled times filled with violence, disease, chaos and deceit, standing out in the sun, in the breeze, among flowers, birds, insects — beauty in such abundance — is a balm. And the work we do in part undoes the destruction of nature we see almost everywhere else we look."

The turkey vultures seen here from the trail cam are feeding on carrion that is routinely put out for them in this area. Other birds, mammals, and insects, as well as the soil, benefit from this practice. Williams said they placed 493 carcasses on their land gathered up from roads during 2021.

If you wish to receive Andrew's MSP notes with musings about his encounters and efforts, please send your request to him at studiesnature@gmail.com. Indicate if you want to receive most of them, or just the most interesting ones

Because volunteers helped remove the invasive brush here, these oak and hickory trees will be able to grow, which will benefit wildlife and contribute to clean air. Photo by Zach Grycan

What Woods You Do?

Silver Creek Woods Preserve

What would you do if it was your responsibility to ensure the long-term health of the woodlands in northern Illinois? Currently, across the region and beyond, our woodland ecosystems are in trouble. Mature oak trees are in decline, and land managers are recognizing more and more that our woods don't have a crop of younger oaks to take their place. Other trees that don't offer the same benefits are growing up (and fast) instead. Our understory, all the wildflowers and grasses that grow underneath the trees, are dwindling due to too much shade and a history of abuse from over-grazing by deer and cattle and repeated high levels of soil disturbance from development.

In Illinois, according to **American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat: State of the States** report, we lost almost 180,000 acres of land between 2001 and 2016 to urban development. High quality farmland, along with the associated woodlands, have been lost to pavement and chopped up into small lots.

Woodlands, often part of family farms, play a critical role in wildlife survival. They also provide important benefits to slow down heavy rainfall, thereby reducing flooding and erosion. Yet healthy woodlands won't happen by chance. Over the past century invasive plant and wildlife species introduced from other continents have severely reduced our native diversity by outcompeting what naturally grows here while adding even more shade to the point where native plants can't survive.

It's for this reason that Natural Land Institute is so appreciative of local families who are managing their lands for wildlife, water, and local agriculture in a manner that addresses the impacts of changing weather and invasives.

We too, as property owners of natural areas throughout the region, are factoring in how we manage our lands. Take **Silver Creek Woods Preserve** in Rockford, Illinois as an example. There you'll notice how NLI staff and volunteers have been hard at work at addressing these issues for more than a decade. For one thing, you can see through the woods now, the spaces between the trees provide the sensation that the woods can breathe! The story of land management down at "the Silver" has really been one of, "Do what you can with what you got."

Photo by Jill Kennay

Volunteers are giving area wildlife a boost by planting oak trees as part of the Silver Creek Woods Preserve Management Plan. Here, Chad Hoover plants a Swamp White Oak tree.

In 2016 NLI engaged in a contract with the **Natural Resources Conservation Service** (NRCS) called **Environmental Quality Incentives Program** (EQIP). The program provided a cost-share from the **U.S. Department of Agriculture** to assist NLI in the removal of invasive species, and the purchase and planting of native seed and trees, more specifically - and quite importantly, mostly oak trees. We couldn't have accomplished all this without a stalwart group of volunteers showing up every third Saturday of the month. Silver Creek Woods remains one of our most active preserves when it comes to volunteer engagement.

Last fall, over the course of two days, volunteers helped us plant 544 trees and 100 shrubs in 3-gallon pots across 23 acres. These trees will help slow down floodwaters and provide critical habitat for foraging bats and many species of bees and butterflies.

To enhance this restoration effort, we also worked with volunteers to scatter about 47 pounds of native seed in one final area, bringing our total of native seed introduced to 183 pounds. A big "Shout Out" goes to Site Steward, **Dion Faith**, **Majestic Oaks** and **Taylor Creek Restoration Nurseries** for working with our staff to make all this happen! This coming summer and fall we will be continuing to enhance the prairie and woodlands. We'd love to have you join us. Please reach out to Zach Grycan (920/912-4338) to see how you can help, or if you'd like to schedule a visit.

Photo by Zach Grycan

Seeding the understory helps slow runoff and allows for groundwater recharge, as well as provides cover for wildlife. Scattering seeds in the fall is beneficial because native seeds need the cold, moist period during winter to allow them to germinate in the following growing season.

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Stewardship Wish List

Do you want to help improve local habitat efforts? Donating items from the list below is a great way to accelerate the effort. You can also donate funds, including gifts of stock and we'll put it right to work. Listed in order of priority.

- ❑ Clean yellow kitty litter buckets (with tops if possible)
- ❑ Roof rack for truck
- ❑ Rubber boots and waders (Looking for smaller sizes)
- ❑ Industrial Shelving (Pallet Rack or Metal Shelving)
- ❑ Pull Behind Mower for ATV/UTV
- ❑ Tractor Canopy
- ❑ Air compressor for truck
- ❑ 500 Gallon Water Tank (Baffled or Leg Tank)
- ❑ 4x4 Pickup Truck for "Farm Use"
- ❑ Tractor 100hp

Photo by Jill Kennay

Thank you to the volunteers who helped plant a variety of trees at Silver Creek Woods Preserve last fall including Swamp White, Bur, White, Red and Chinquapin oak, Hazelnut and Serviceberry, which will benefit wildlife and reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. Pictured here, L to R: Jim Akers, Chad Hoover, and Dion Faith.

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