

BMAP NEWS



BMAP
BLUE MOUNDS AREA PROJECT

Conservation and Community. Together.

Winter 2026 • Volume 29 Number 1

SPECIAL EDITION!

Other Blue Mounds Area Projects and Partnerships

Originally published in the summer 2025 issue of Wisconsin People & Ideas, the magazine for members and friends of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

Southern Driftless Grasslands (SDG) is a dynamic partnership of public and private organizations working together to actively support the conservation of grasslands in Southwest Wisconsin to benefit the region's wildlife, water, farms and communities. Partners envision Southwestern Wisconsin to be a place rich with healthy grasslands, successful working farms, clear flowing streams, diverse wildlife and people who value and enjoy this landscape. To learn more about how SDG partners are helping to restore grasslands for birds like Bobbi, please visit driftlessgrasslands.org.



The Schurch-Thomson Prairie near Blue Mounds provides habitat for hundreds of rare and endangered species, including grassland birds like bobolinks.

Bobbi's Migration Journal

A look at the Southern Driftless Grasslands through the eyes of a bobolink

By Jenni Foshey, Andy Bingle (partnership members, Southern Driftless Grasslands)

Day 1:

Preparing for migration and dreaming of the Southern Driftless

It's mid-April, about that time of year for me to document my upcoming migration. The days are getting shorter here in the Pampas of Argentina, and I can feel the urge to migrate north. I've been feasting on insects and seeds, putting on half of my body weight in reserves. Soon I'll join my flock, heading north to our home in Wisconsin's Southern Driftless region. It's in this unique place where we grassland birds have found expansive habitat suitable for our nesting needs.

After eight months away, I can't wait to see the deep greens of the grasses, the light blue of the sky and the bright yellow, red and purple forbs that accent the landscape. I can already hear the subtle sound of grass blowing in the wind and the songs of the many

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Greg Jones

Grace Vosen and Tom Senatori are doing a great job making sure this newsletter has interesting content and an attractive design. And I can't say enough good things about Sam Anderson and his work as our staff ecologist.

As I hope you know, BMAP's membership period is on an annual basis. Everyone's membership expires on the first of the year and needs to be renewed for that year. If you're planning to renew for 2026 and haven't done so

I want to start out with a little housekeeping regarding our organization. First off, I would like to report that BMAP is in great financial shape at the start of this year. Our membership numbers are as good as ever.

With your membership dues, you will continue to receive this newsletter, mailed right to your door. You are eligible for a property visit from our staff ecologist. You will also get the E-Bulletin sent to your email inbox. It is full of upcoming event notices and other pertinent information of seasonal interest that can help you through the steps of land management.

If you want to give back to BMAP in another way, consider joining our Board of Directors. We're hoping to add one or two members this year. The Board meets for a couple of hours about 10 times a year. We could use your help guiding the organization.

Maybe you feel you could help us out, but on a less regular basis. We could also use help with our events. Email us at info@bluemounds.org with questions or to sign up.

Finally, just because we are in the

throes of winter doesn't mean there is no way to advance your land restoration efforts. You can go after the "woodies" now: shrubs or small trees such as honeysuckle, buckthorn, autumn olive and multiflora rose. If you cut the multiflora rose and intend to leave it laying there, it would be a good idea to collect the fruits and dispose of them.

I have cut a lot of box elder trees this time of year to achieve our management goals. I strongly recommend "painting" the stumps with herbicide. They will just re-sprout in the following year if you skip this step. (They may re-sprout anyway, sometimes from just one missed spot after treating!) Check up on brush removal areas in the spring.

For what it's worth, I may also cut off the seed heads of undesirable biennials such as sticktights (*Hackelia*), burdock and annuals such as giant ragweed. Hopefully, this will reduce the spread of new plants.

I hope I'll see you at one of our Winter Conversations this season! 

ECOLOGIST'S REPORT



Sam Anderson

nearly 1000 acres of southern Wisconsin prairie, savanna and woodland, all stewarded by hardworking BMAP members.

The mild spring and early-summer rain led to a verdant summer, with many of you sharing stories of prairies in full bloom and heartwarming observations of monarchs, eastern bluebirds, bats and other creatures taking advantage of the

Hello, BMAP members –

Once again, a growing season has ended all too soon! It was a great season for BMAP, with excellent tours of member properties and dozens of site visits. I visited

abundance. Now, the fall has quickly transitioned into a snowy December. I hope our hunters have had a safe and successful season.

With about 1.8 million deer in the state, hunting can be a key management tool for BMAP members interested in protecting saplings, spring ephemerals and other flora that are deer favorites. If you don't hunt, consider opening your land to a hunter in the community, or picking up the pastime yourself.

I'm starting to put together the schedule for the 2026 field season, which of course includes BMAP site visits! If you're interested in having me visit your property, just contact me at bluemounds.org/contact-us to find a date and time that works for you.

Thank you to those of you who invited me to your properties in 2025. From native shrublands to pine relicts, it's great to see the range of habitats that you all are working so hard to manage and restore.

Just because the growing season is done doesn't mean that the work ends. The BMAP community does a great job of coming together throughout the winter. And I'm also always happy to communicate via email (ecologist@bluemounds.org) or set up a phone call if you want to discuss winter stewardship, prescribed fire or your plans for greener months.

Remember that it's your support that allows BMAP to continue serving private land restoration through consulting and by building the restoration community in southwestern Wisconsin. Whether you support us through your continued membership, additional donations or invitations to others to join the BMAP community, your contributions are vital and greatly appreciated.

All the best,
Sam 

BMAPNEWS

Migration Journal

Continued from page 1

birds that reside in this region. But I am not there yet — it is still thousands of wing-beats away.

Day 15: Migrating north through uncertainty

It's almost May and we've been flying for two weeks, covering thousands of kilometers. Although, as bobolinks, we have one of the longest migrations of any North American songbird, the thought of reaching the Southern Driftless region keeps me going. We have been flying there for as long as any of us can remember.

Like many other grassland birds, we nest on the ground, so we are particular about the height and density of the grasses where we choose to build our nests. We prefer medium-height grasses with no trees around, as trees can house and hide predators of our eggs and chicks. We can usually find these nesting spots in prairies, hay and small grain fields and well-managed pastures.

Unfortunately, these grasslands we depend on are diminishing rapidly, causing a decline in various bird species. The other day, my tuxedoed bobolink partner, Tux, cautioned that of all groups of birds, the grassland groups are experiencing the quickest rate of decline — about two percent annually. Because of this, bobolinks are considered a "tipping point species," meaning we are showing an accelerated rate of decline. I knew our numbers were dwindling, but I hadn't realized we were among the most at risk.

They say the biggest reason for our decline is habitat loss. Historically, the Southern Driftless region was rich in prairies and open oak savannas. But over the years, our family has seen these open oak savannas and prairies turning into row-cropped agricultural fields crisscrossed by roads and dotted with human houses. Another issue affecting our grasslands is encroachment from invasive woody brush and trees. In the past, these were kept in check by fires, which used to occur every three to five years in the region. Over the last 100 years, however, fire has been suppressed to protect human structures, and

this has allowed invasives to spread throughout the grasslands. As a result, it has been increasingly difficult for us to find a favorable place to nest.

We have plenty of time to reflect during our journey north, and each year I find myself thinking of all the uncertainties we experience year after year. I hope this year we find an adequate spot to raise our chicks.

Day 30: Finding a home among the wildflowers

It's May 15, and we've made it! The Southern Driftless is always a welcome and beautiful sight to see after such a long journey. It feels great to fly once again among my favorite purple hues of the spiderwort, wild lupine and pasqueflower.

Upon arrival, Tux and I choose a cozy niche of the grassland to call home for the season. The humans call it Schurch-Thomson Prairie, and it's owned and cared for by a group called The Prairie Enthusiasts. Although there is agriculture nearby, this prairie has everything we look for in a home: medium-height grasses, a treeless open landscape and little woody vegetation. Another interesting observation is that humans enjoy visiting Schurch-Thomson Prairie, just like we bobolinks do! Today they were walking on the trails and taking photos of wildflowers, butterflies and (of course) us birds.

I found some perfectly dense grass to build my nest in an open field. It should take me about two days to build my comfortable, two-inch nest of grasses and sedges. In the meantime, Tux has been keeping an eye on our surroundings while gathering food.

As I watch him fly, I can't help but think that his plumage looks like a black-and-white patterned tuxedo, with a striking yellowish hood.

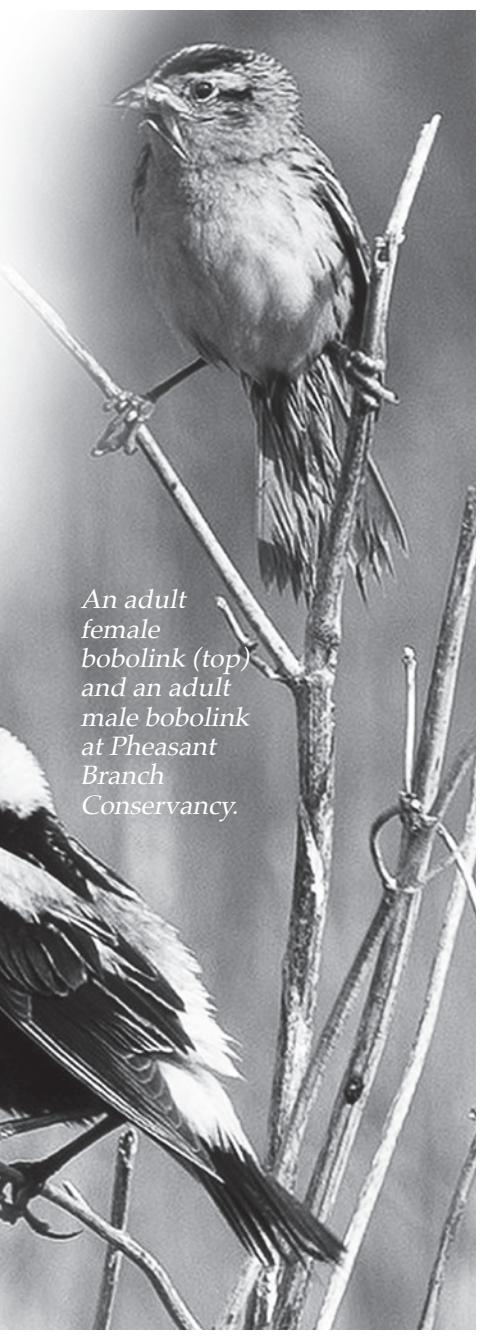
Later today, I am going to catch up with my friend Sandi, an upland sandpiper I met last year while exploring the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area. During the breeding season, Sandi lives at Barneveld Prairie, which is only a few wingbeats away to the northwest. Her

home is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy. She, too, is busy finding a good place in the grasslands to nest and will migrate back to Argentina with us bobolinks at the end of the summer.

Day 45: Nesting and listening to the land

It's the end of May now, and while discreetly incubating my five purple-speckled eggs, I've had the privilege of overhearing human conversation about the work being done to protect habitats like mine. I now understand

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An adult female bobolink (top) and an adult male bobolink at Pheasant Branch Conservancy.

Photo by Else Karlsen

that conserving the grasslands of this region is no small feat. One of the challenges to achieving landscape-scale grassland conservation is the land being fragmented. As for land in the Southern Driftless region, 95 percent is privately owned, and most of it is divided into small parcels ranging from 20 to 300 acres. Managing land takes a coordinated effort from everyone — conservation organizations, governmental organizations, private-sector contractors and private landowners — to help protect these vital grassland ecosystems.

Apparently, there has been an array of conservation partnerships in the region over the past few decades. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin have identified the Southern Driftless as an ecologically important region to conserve. Groups like the Blue Mounds Area Project, Pheasants Forever, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and county conservation departments are helping to connect landowners with resources to manage their land.

Organizations like The Prairie Enthusiasts and The Nature Conservancy are also playing their part by owning and managing some of the parcels that have vital grasslands on them. Land trusts like the Driftless Area Land Conservancy are working with landowners who want to protect their properties forever through land easements. There are even special avian-focused groups, such as the Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance, the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Partnership and the American Bird Conservancy, that are looking out for birds like Sandi, Tux and me.

Hearing about all of this work,

I feel grateful for all of these groups and individuals who have contributed to the achievements thus far. However, there is still more work to be done to make sure the eggs I'm incubating today will have grasslands to return to in the future.

Day 60: A new generation

Good news! It's June 14, and my five eggs have hatched! Tux and I have been busy caring for our young. Even though Tux provides food for other nests in addition to mine, our chicks are putting on weight and are looking healthier every day. In a week and a half or so, they will have fledged and will be ready for flying lessons, my favorite part of raising our chicks. I already talked with a couple of other bobolinks teaching their young to fly, some of whom chose to nest on private lands this year.

Through conversation with my fellow bobolinks, I am identifying more and more private landowners who are recognizing the importance of grasslands and are deciding to take steps to restore their land on their own. Some humans have beautiful grasslands which they use to produce hay for rotational grazing, and they are making sure not to disturb our nests from May 15 to July 1. We are very appreciative of these new bird-friendly haying and grazing practices. I hope this trend continues to grow, as it might help us move away from being a "tipping point species."

The other day, as our first egg was hatching, we overheard humans from a group called Pheasants Forever talking about how they're training landowners to administer prescribed fires on their own property through a

series of workshops. They mentioned that using prescribed fire can turn the brushy sections of their land into the open prairies they once were. Maybe someday, one of those private landowners' restored grasslands will be the place one of my chicks chooses to nest when they reach my age. That's a nice thought.

Day 110: Preparing for Argentina with hope for the future

It's early August and all of our chicks can fly, meaning it's time to set our sights on Argentina. The Southern Driftless region has been a great home for us, but the cycle of migration continues. As we get ready to leave this special place, I reflect on what I have learned this year by listening to Tux, my other grassland bird friends and respectful humans as they passed the nest. It's clear that continued pressures from land-use change, lack of resources for land management and the fragmentation of land parcels have made it difficult to achieve landscape-scale grassland conservation and protect grassland bird populations. But there are multiple efforts from different groups of people and private landowners who are working on our behalf to help restore this land to the open oak savannas and grasslands that once spanned the landscape here.

For these efforts, my friends and I are truly grateful. I'm hopeful that efforts like these will continue so my young — and their young — will be able to find safe places to nest in the future. But for now, it's time again to warm up these muscles and prepare for our long journey south.

See you next year, Wisconsin! ☀

DRIFTLESS AREA LAND CONSERVANCY

Nurturing Southwest Wisconsin's natural and agricultural heritage through permanent land protection and restoration that connects people to the land and to each other.

In 2025, we're celebrating 25 years of conservation, care, and connection! Join us out in the Driftless for hikes, workshops, volunteer opportunities, and much more.

www.driftlessconservancy.org

NEW BMAP MEMBERS

Please welcome these fine folks who have joined BMAP since our last newsletter came out!

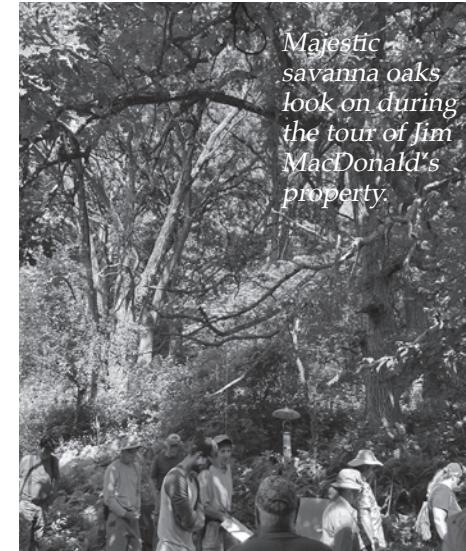
- Joann & Richard Laufenberg
- Nancy McGill
- Nancy Streiff & Greg Baker

BMAP WALKS: A SUMMER OF SUCCESS

By Linda Millunzi-Jones, Sam Anderson, Sarah Crittenden, Greg Jones

On May 31, our usual group of excited restoration enthusiasts gathered in a driveway to kick off our summer of Property Tours and Walks with a Naturalist. The driveway belonged to Paul Fuchs and Martha Fish, who are restoring their property near Belleville.

Like many of us, Paul and Martha started off by making land management decisions that they would later want to change. For instance, they planted their favorite walnut and pine trees. Now, they find themselves removing these trees to let the oak savanna species grow. With help from work crews, they have opened up a beautiful hillside of oak woodland.



Majestic savanna oaks look on during the tour of Jim MacDonald's property.

Prairie Spirit Wildlife Sanctuary. John talked about the hard work that it has taken two people to do. He described tools and techniques for large-scale restoration and how to get some help with the bigger tasks. He also touched on some funding opportunities. A discussion on easements for preserving a property's integrity was appreciated by all. It was a pleasure to observe the incredible diversity that John and Kel have promoted.

As for our Walk with a Naturalist program, we kicked off the series on July 5 at Shea Wetland (part of Mounds View Grassland south of Blue Mounds). Pat Trochell graciously met us again at Shea after we rescheduled this walk due to rain last summer. The wait gave that well-tended prairie one more year to show us its remarkable beauty.

One of the first things Pat asked us was if we knew what plant was blooming throughout the wet prairie in front of us. It was our old friend, leadplant. It's surprising to see a mesic prairie plant seemingly out of place according to field guides, but this demonstrated the unsung flexibility of our native plants.

We toured the rest of the prairie with careful footfalls. Prairie lilies were beginning to bloom, and we didn't want to inadvertently step on one that hadn't unfurled its beauty yet. Diversity is alive and thriving in Shea Prairie.

Like Shea, the Table Bluff Segment of the Ice Age Trail (also known as the Swamplovers property) is notable for its range of habitats — from open cattail marshes to dry prairie. At our walk on August 2, we first ventured along the wetland communities near the parking lot, highlighting the nesting platforms and migratory bird habitat. The wetlands were an excellent example of how both non-native and native species can become overly abundant in restored habitats. This was demonstrated by pale Indian-plantain (*Arnoglossum atriplicifolium*) near the wetland margins.

As we meandered up the trail to the pavilion, we noted the shorter stature of the vegetation, the importance of exposed bedrock for species like cliffbrake (*Pellaea glabella*) and the increasing abundance of flowering dry-prairie species like wild petunia

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BMAP Walks

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(*Ruellia humilis*) and prairie onion (*Allium stellatum*).

On this sunny day in mid-summer, the pollinators and insects were abundant along the trail sections we hiked, with numerous monarchs, viceroy and great black digger wasps being the most notable. While descending from the overlook, we spent much of the walk discussing the hard work that has gone into managing this section of the Ice Age Trail. Intermittent stands of the invasive bouncing-bet or common soapwort reminded us that there is always more work to be done.

Finally, we spent a beautiful early-fall day hiking on the south end of the newly developed Welsh Hills Segment of the Driftless Trail. The Driftless Trail is a project of the Driftless Area Land Conservancy that will be a 50-mile loop including the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway and both Blue Mounds and Governor Dodge State Parks, as well as other public and private conservation lands.

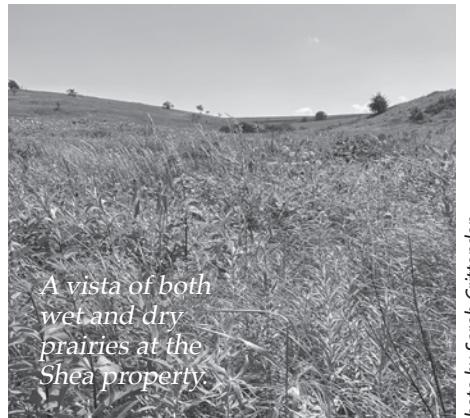


Photo by Sarah Crittenden

This newest segment, not yet open to the public, is on the historic Taliesin estate and provides a ridgeline view of the Lowery Creek watershed below. Hike leader Barb Barzen shared information about other portions of the Driftless Trail that are open to the public. She also talked about DALC's outreach to interested landowners to help make the trail complete.

Pat Trochell, ecologist, and Ken Wade, geologist, were along on the walk and deepened our knowledge of the plants and geological features we saw along the way. Barb noted with a smile that everyone present was looking down — whether at prairie plants, interesting rocks or the newly created trail. 



Photo by Kristina Weld

More Fire on the Ground, Safely

By Kristina Weld (Training Specialist, Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council)

We are all familiar with the benefits of fire for Wisconsin's ecosystems. Our vegetation communities, including those of the Driftless region, evolved with frequent low-intensity fire. Our prairies, savannas, wetlands and woodlands have grown less diverse over the past two centuries due to fire suppression, invasive species and overgrazing.

Today, Wisconsin burns around 75,000 acres annually. But for us to preserve our remaining fire-dependent ecosystems, we should be burning around one million acres each year. The Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council promotes prescribed fire statewide through outreach, training and collaboration among all interested parties.

WPFC is working on several fronts to expand the use of prescribed fire. Of particular interest to BMAP members is our work to increase private landowners' ability to burn their own property. Many landowners who understand the need for fire simply lack the resources and expertise to safely burn their land. WPFC seeks to change that.

Landowners who want to burn their own land first need basic fire training and experience burning with others. We launched our first landowner training session in the fall of 2024, and we have hosted several such sessions in 2025. These trainings are designed to empower landowners to become burn crew members qualified to get experience helping other landowners or volunteer organizations.

Attendees at our two-day introductory training learn about

fire behavior, ecology, safety and equipment. We provide mentored live-fire exercises that give everyone a chance to try out equipment and get more comfortable working with fire. We have presented sessions in Arlington, Tomah and Oconomowoc, with plans for more in 2026 in and around Dane County and as far away as Barron County. We are also partnering with Pheasants Forever and Southern Driftless Grasslands to offer specialty trainings such as burn break preparation and burn plan writing workshops.

Along with training, we are supporting landowner collaborations known as Prescribed Burn Associations to help landowners develop their ability to burn more acres safely and effectively. Please reach out to us at training@prescribedfire.org if you need technical expertise or help organizing in your neighborhood!

WPFC also offers leadership training for squad bosses and burn bosses. We are collaborating with the DNR to provide state-recognized certification for burn bosses. These efforts to increase our collective statewide prescribed fire capacity are described in detail on our website, prescribedfire.org.

We encourage you to help us restore fire to all of our Wisconsin acres that need it! You can support our mission by becoming a member, attending a training or coming to our annual conference on January 9 & 10 in Winona (in conjunction with the Minnesota PFC — more information on our website). Happy burning! 

FROM THE EDITOR



Grace Vosen

This fall, I returned to Schurz-Thomson Prairie to join the volunteer seed cleaning and collecting crew. We braved hot sun and high pollen counts in August, wind and damp grass in September, and cold and dust once we moved into the barn to process the seeds. It's not a task for the faint of heart!

But the chance to be out on these prairies — where the silence is so great that crickets chirp in the daytime — with my fellow volunteers was irresistible. When most of nature is going into hibernation, it's nice to be gathering seeds that will bring life to future generations of prairie plants.

Winter is a great time to return to the simple joy of gathering with people who share our interests. Chat over coffee about the progress you've made restoring your land. Attend lectures that delve into a new corner of our conservation world. (There are some great ideas on page 8!). Travel a favorite hiking trail by moonlight and see how it has changed since the growing season ended. Raise a glass to your accomplishments, and take time to fawn over nursery catalogs for 2026.

Just like the seeds we've planted for next spring, these moments of connection can be saved against the long winter nights. I may have seeds stuck to my clothing and seed dust in my lungs, but I don't regret the time spent with prairies and prairie people.

A final note: It has been a pleasure to become part of the BMAP community through editing this newsletter. However, circumstances have changed enough that it is getting hard for me to keep up. Contact me at newsletter@bluemounds.org if you would like to be the next Editor! Please spread the word to the readers, writers and/or conservationists in your life. 

This just in! BMAP is **now** seeking a **Newsletter Editor**

Paid contract work with training provided. Flexible start date.

Help us reach our conservation community!

DALC Has a Banner 25th Year

By Barb Barzen (Community Conservation Specialist, Driftless Area Land Conservancy)

Join BMAP on March 12 for a Winter Conversation lecture by Barb Barzen. See page 8 for details.

When a small group of concerned citizens launched the Driftless Area Land Conservancy in 2000, not even these far-sighted founders could predict the impact this land trust would be having 25 years later.

DALC focused solely on developing conservation easements for interested landowners during the first 15 years. Then, opportunities arose that were not in any strategic plan but dramatically broadened our scope and imagination.

From 2014-2016, we initiated the legal fight against the Cardinal-Hickory Creek transmission line, helped the Lowery Creek Watershed Initiative chart its course, played a lead role in starting a new era for what is now Southern Driftless Grasslands and started planning the Driftless Trail. The community leaned on DALC then, and we have leaned on our community ever since.

Case in point: a big leap we're currently taking. Thanks to broad community support, DALC recently purchased the 245-acre Wintergreen property south of Spring Green. With a mile of frontage on the Lower Wisconsin River, this property is an ecological gem that abuts the Taliesin estate and hosts a large Frank Lloyd Wright-style building (see photo on back cover). This will become a welcome center with educational and visitor resources, a gathering place, office and event space and the main trailhead for the 100-mile Driftless Trail.

Four Driftless Trail segments are now open for public use. In April 2026, we will open the Welsh Hills Trail loop, a 2.6-mile segment on the Taliesin property that offers beautiful views of the Jones and Wyoming Valleys and the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway. We will then start to build the next segment through the Lowery Creek watershed.

Within three years, we will open the Lowery Creek segment, Wintergreen trails and more (stay tuned). At DALC-owned preserves, new hiking and biking trails are being built at Wild Oaks in Dane County and planned for Big Rock near Highland. The trails at Erickson Conservation Area and Sardeson Preserve are open now.

We are most excited to be playing a role in developing large blocks of privately owned conservation lands. One of these is a 10-mile-long stretch of properties running from Wintergreen southeast to the Love-Strutt Creeks Fishery Area — well over 6,000 acres — that are, or soon will be, actively managed and/or protected with conservation easements.

Many in DALC's community have expressed their excitement for "being part of something big" this year. Our staff and board couldn't agree more! 

JOIN US FOR WINTER CONVERSATIONS!

These in-person talks are held at the Mount Horeb Community Center, located at 107 N Grove Street. A recording of each event will be posted on BMAP's website. We hope you enjoy learning and socializing!

All Winter Conversations start at 7 PM

Thursday, February 12 Jacob Grace - Savanna Institute

Learn how the Savanna Institute and Canopy Farm Management are laying the groundwork for large-scale agroforestry in the Midwest from their home base in Spring Green. Jacob will speak about Savanna's approach to agroecology, perennial woody crops and fostering productive and diverse landscapes in Wisconsin.

Thursday, February 26 Peter Marshall - Friends of Wisdom Prairie

Shrubs provide habitat, floral resources, food and many other ecosystem services in Wisconsin. Hear about the identification and ecology of diverse native shrubs that you can readily incorporate into your gardens or acreage.

Thursday, March 12 Barb Barzen - Driftless Area Land Conservancy

Barb is DALC's Community Conservation Specialist and has been instrumental in the development of the Driftless Trail. She will talk about how the Trail is being assembled and its importance as a conserved corridor, as well as other plans DALC has for expanding land restoration and land access in our region.



Photo by Randall Hyman, Great Lakes Protection Fund

The Savanna Institute: Working to Lay the Groundwork for Agroforestry in the Midwest

Savanna Institute researchers Ebony Murrell and Lily Hislop examine a black currant plant at Savanna Institute's Spring Green Campus. The Tree Crop Improvement Program is working with a selection of promising agroforestry crops including elderberries, persimmons, hazelnuts and chestnuts.

By Jacob Grace (Public Relations Manager, Savanna Institute)

Join BMAP on February 12 for a Winter Conversation lecture by Jacob Grace. See left column for details.

"In other parts of the world, they don't call this 'agroforestry,'" says Keefe Keeley. "They just call it 'farming.' But in our region, we tend to think of farming with trees as something unusual or new."

Keeley is Executive Director of the Savanna Institute, a nonprofit organization based in southern Wisconsin and central Illinois that works to support agroforestry and perennial farming practices. As he leads a tour of Savanna Institute's Spring Green Campus in southwestern Wisconsin, rows of hybrid hazelnut bushes wave in the breeze, with shorter rows of carrots, potatoes, black currants and other specialty crops growing in between them. Nearby, young hybrid chestnut trees are emerging from their protective tree tubes as a flock of sheep grazes the forages growing underneath.

"The great thing about agroforestry is that it's a 'yes, and,'" Keeley says. "Often, it feels like we're being forced to choose between farming or conservation, between having clean water and abundant wildlife or having nutritious food and viable farm businesses. With agroforestry, we can have all these things — which is what we need."

Interest is growing in agroforestry, or the use of trees and woody plants

in cropping or livestock management. In the 2022 Census of Agriculture, over 30,000 US farms reported using agroforestry practices such as alley cropping, silvopasture, forest farming, riparian forest buffers or windbreaks — a 6% increase from the previous census.

Agroforestry practices mimic the structure and function of savanna ecosystems, such as the native oak savannas that once covered much of southern Wisconsin and inspired the Savanna Institute's name.

"My background was in ecological restoration," says Kevin Wolz, a member of the Savanna Institute's first board of directors. "I was used to going out and finding a degraded forest or prairie and working to restore it. But then I arrived in central Illinois. How do you do habitat restoration when you have no habitat left, when it's just bare ground? And obviously we also need to eat. And then I discovered agroforestry and tree crops and that just seemed like the tools we needed."

The Savanna Institute was founded in 2013 when a network of Midwestern farmers, researchers and agroforestry practitioners came together in search of more information on how to do agroforestry. They decided that a new organization was needed.

"Working with perennial crops is a long-term commitment," says Wolz. "We needed an organization that could take on some of the risks that it didn't make sense for individual farms to take, and to do the type of long-term research that doesn't

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DID YOU KNOW?

Before he was a champion of prairie restoration and co-steward of the beautiful Pleasant Valley Conservancy, Tom Brock (1926-2021) was known for another innovation. The following article is from the website of the "Golden Goose Award", an award promoting the use of federal funding to advance scientific knowledge and improve society.

Most people go to Yellowstone to explore the outdoors, watch geysers and look for moose, elk and bears. But in 1966, two scientists went to the park with a very different mission, not knowing that their quest would transform human medicine and so much more.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, microbiologist Thomas Brock and his undergraduate research assistant, Hudson Freeze, went to Yellowstone to study thermophiles — heat-loving bacteria that thrive in extreme temperatures. They were curious about how organisms survived in extreme environmental conditions. Among the bacteria they collected at the park were microorganisms they would name *Thermus aquaticus*. And those bacteria —Taq, as they were ultimately nicknamed — helped launch the field of biotechnology and the ongoing genomics revolution.

From new drugs and vaccines to diagnostic tests, biotechnology has enabled life-saving advances in human health. How did these obscure bacteria, found in a natural hot spring, have such an enormous impact?

Since the discovery of DNA as the material encoding our genetic blueprint, scientists had wanted to study and exploit this complicated molecule to improve human health. They needed a lot of material, however, and cells contain only a minute amount of DNA. In theory, scientists knew how to "amplify" DNA, effectively replicating what goes on in the cells of living creatures. They could unravel the DNA and use enzymes called polymerases, which occur in all DNA and act like photocopies, to generate many copies of a tiny piece of DNA.

Unfortunately, the way to unravel (or denature) the DNA in the lab is to subject it to very high temperatures, but the polymerase enzymes stopped working or fell apart at those temperatures. Scientists could keep adding fresh enzyme, but it was a laborious and inefficient process.

Brock and Hudson's discovery provided a key solution to this problem. Like most organisms, *Thermus aquaticus* contained DNA and therefore also had the complement of enzymes needed to replicate that DNA, including polymerase. Because the bacteria were adapted to living in water at extremely high (near boiling) temperatures, Taq polymerase could take the heat, remaining active at the temperature used to denature DNA.

In 1983, Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Kary Mullis exploited this attribute of Taq to create a technology called the Polymerase Chain Reaction, which allowed the generation of unlimited copies of any fragment of DNA, large or small. Six years later, the journal *Science* named Taq polymerase the "Molecule of the Year." In 2007, a publication on the history of PCR produced by the American Association for the Advancement of Science noted that "few technologies in the life sciences can claim to have been as pivotal as [PCR]."

The ability to amplify copies of DNA through PCR has led to accurate genetic tests for a wide variety of diseases and conditions, advanced forensic science to analyze crime scene evidence and helped make possible the sequencing of the human genome. Discoveries made using PCR have led to cutting-edge drugs and vaccines for diseases ranging from cancer to kidney disease.

All of this because two scientists with an NSF grant followed their insatiable curiosity to a hot spring in Yellowstone National Park!



Photo by Bill Sonzogni

An interpretive sign in Yellowstone National Park that describes Tom Brock's contributions to the invention of PCR.



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The Savanna Institute

Continued from page 8

really fit within the two-to-four-year grant cycle of universities."

As interest in agroforestry has grown across the Midwest, the Savanna Institute has grown to meet the demand. The organization's programs now include:

- A Tree Crop Improvement Program, which works to develop improved varieties of promising agroforestry crops such as elderberries, persimmons and hybrid chestnuts
- An Ecosystem Science Program to assess the long-term impacts of agroforestry practices on soil health, water quality and biodiversity
- A Commercialization Program that works across supply chains to boost demand and evaluate market expectations for emerging products
- A network of Demonstration Farms in Illinois and Wisconsin, showing what farm-scale agroforestry can look like in a variety of landscapes and contexts
- A Technical Assistance Program, which provides free, one-on-one support to farmers and landowners who are ready to begin implementing agroforestry on their land
- An On-Farm Training Program that pairs participants with an agroforestry mentor farm in their region where they receive structured lessons and hands-on experience doing agroforestry
- Print resources and guides, a podcast and a YouTube channel for sharing relevant information, stories and announcements
- The Perennial Farm Gathering, Savanna Institute's signature event, which brings together agroforestry practitioners from across the Midwest (and beyond) for several days of networking, community building and knowledge sharing

In 2022, the Savanna Institute helped launch Canopy Farm Management, a farm management business and tree crop nursery. This business is intended to meet two of the major bottlenecks in scaling up Midwest agroforestry: the need for high-quality plant material, and the demand for agroforestry farm management services for hire. Canopy is also the home of Canopy Compass, a free crop suitability mapping tool that allows users to generate maps of their land with estimates of its suitability for over twenty common perennial crops.

"Tree crops are a good option for people looking to make their land more resilient long-term," says Wolz, who now serves as CEO of Canopy. "Perennial crops have deep root structures that promote soil health, and woody plants are particularly good at capturing and storing carbon from the atmosphere." Agroforestry can also reduce runoff, improve water quality and provide habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

"The hallmarks of the native oak savannas," says Keeley, "like deep roots, diversity, abundance and human co-creators, give us a vision for what farms of the future need to look like. If my time here has taught me anything, it's that this 'why' of the Savanna Institute is what makes all of this work possible."

You can learn more at savannainstitute.org.

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WANT TO CONNECT WITH OTHER LANDOWNERS?

Emily Buckingham, BMAP Facebook Volunteer

The Blue Mounds Area Project Facebook page is a good place to find information about upcoming events, but it's a one-way flow of information. Did you know we also have a Facebook group? Joining the BMAP Facebook group ([facebook.com/groups/BMAPcommunity](https://www.facebook.com/groups/BMAPcommunity)) is a great way to connect with other BMAP members. To facilitate engagement, we'll soon begin posting regular conversation starters.

At any time, you can also post:

- Restoration-related questions
- Requests for help with burns
- Extra seeds or plants to share
- Photos of what's growing in your prairie or woodland
- Anything else that relates to ecological restoration in Wisconsin

To join the group, visit [facebook.com/groups/BMAPcommunity](https://www.facebook.com/groups/BMAPcommunity) and click "Join Group." The group is open to all landowners and conservationists in the Driftless Area or surrounding areas who are working to restore native biodiversity and ecosystem health.

BLUE MOUNDS AREA PROJECT MEMBERSHIP FORM

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We welcome your comments, submissions and advertisements.

Newsletter Editor: Grace Vosen (newsletter@bluemounds.org) Graphic Design: Tom Senatori

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BMAP maintains a calendar year membership cycle. If you are receiving a complimentary copy of the newsletter, please consider becoming a member.