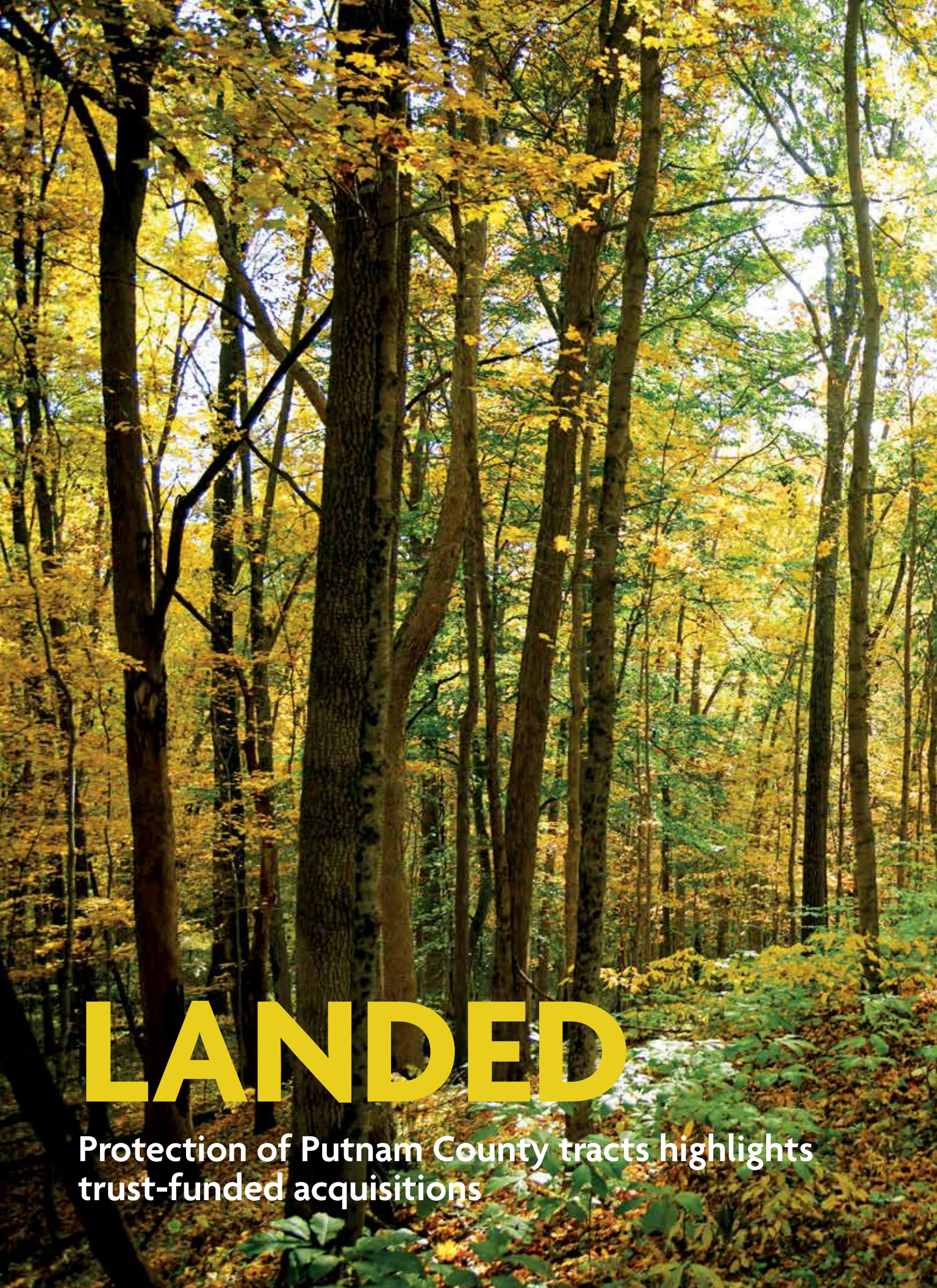




LANDED

Protection of Putnam County tracts highlights
trust-funded acquisitions



The 138-acre addition to Big Walnut Natural Area near Bainbridge had been on DNR's wish list for about 30 years.

By Marty Benson, OI staff
Photography by Brent Drinkut

Big Walnut Nature Preserve, in the Big Walnut Creek Valley in north-central Putnam County, is a 245-acre treasure. Hikers seeking a moderate, secluded 2-mile woodland trek love its Tall Timber Trail for its wildflowers and wildlife.

A National Natural Landmark since 1968, the nature preserve lies within the greater conservation mass known as Big Walnut Natural Area, which protects about 2,500 acres from development.

The area's land is a large, intact forest block in central Indiana's portion of the Wisconsin till plain, within what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) calls the Eastern Corn Belt Plains Ecoregion. As the name suggests, this ecoregion was largely converted to agricultural use, mostly for corn, after European settlement, which harmed its terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. For that reason, conservationists have been looking to protect as much of it as possible since the early 1960s.

Since the mid-1980s, DNR, with partnership and assistance from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Central Indiana Land Trust, Inc. (CILTI), has protected a complex



(Above) A small stream winds through the addition to Big Walnut Natural Area in Putnam County. (Opposite page, from top) State-threatened paper birch trees grow at North Woods Nature Preserve, Indiana's 299th, which added 38.22 acres to the Boreal Flatwoods Nature Area in LaPorte County. Screw stem grows in the understory at North Woods Nature Preserve.





WANT TO CONSERVE LAND?

Put your money where your interest is. You can donate to BHCT through the Natural Resources Foundation by going to **IndianaNRF.org** and selecting "Donate" or by contacting Jody Kress at **jkress@dnr.IN.gov** or 317-234-5447.

You can also donate and show your support of BHCT by buying an Environmental License Plate at **enviropate.IN.gov**. The cost of the plate is \$40, \$25 of which goes to BHCT. All proceeds are used for conservation protection.



of parcels throughout Big Walnut Natural Area, piecing together a matrix of upland and lowland refuges, including the nature preserve.

Mostly known for its north-facing-slope ice age relic plant communities, Big Walnut Natural Area shelters Indiana's most extensive populations of state-endangered Canada yew, an evergreen native shrub that is always associated with steep slopes in the understory of the state's rare Eastern hemlock groves.

Former Division of Nature Preserves director John Bacone and assistant director Tom Swinford, both now retired from DNR, put one of the last interior pieces of the area that was still privately owned, approximately 138 acres of high-quality forest, on DNR's watch/want list roughly 30 years ago.

"The bluffs, upland woods, and quality of forests would be valuable for any land developer or timber company," said Swinford, who is now TNC's director of stewardship. "If not acquired by DNR for the purpose of protection, there is little

In the wetland portion of Boreal Flatwoods Nature Area in LaPorte County, a mossy patch rises out of land that is covered in water most of the year.







(Above) Fern Station, the state's first acquisition using Next Level Conservation Trust funding, provides habitat for many species. (Opposite) BHCT helped fund a conservation easement to extend the South Adams Trail.

doubt that the land would be developed for residential occupation, bringing with it the suite of problems that can clash with land protection.”

In 2022, thanks to funding from the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust (BHCT), the long road toward acquisition culminated with this vital piece of the conservation area's core in DNR's protective hands.

“Adding this parcel to Big Walnut Nature Preserve, which is the eventual plan, will provide the citizens of the state the highest quality natural area experience Indiana has to offer,” said Andrew Reuter, current assistant director of Nature Preserves.

The acquired tract contains a steep, high-quality, north-facing slope that is ideal for the hemlock restoration DNR plans.

In addition, the tract's upland and lowland woods are of exceptional quality. Only small areas of invasive plants are evident, and most of those are around clearings, such as for the property's cabin and small shed, or near where crops were planted farther to the east of the tract. The existing structures will be demolished and removed.

“Large mature forests of this quality are undoubtedly a refuge for a suite of species, including neotropical migratory birds that require extensive interior habitat for successful reproduction and survival,” Reuter said.

Many species of migratory songbirds with declining populations that depend upon such habitat, including worm-eating warbler, black-and-white warbler, cerulean warbler, and hooded warbler are attracted to such habitat.

Other rare species that frequent this type of habitat include Illinois snowfly, which is a stonefly; arrowhead spiketail, which is a type of dragonfly; and wavy rayed lamp mussel. In terms of rare plants, Wolf's bluegrass, butternut trees, and Kentucky viburnum are present, in addition to the previously mentioned Canada yew.

This tract is just one example of how the BHCT helps Hoosiers by acquiring land to protect in perpetuity.

BHCT makes acquisitions like these and others possible through funding from an annual allocation from the Indiana General Assembly, sales of Environmental License

Plates, and donations. A financial match from the recipient DNR division, in this case the Division of Nature Preserves, is required

NEXT-LEVEL LAND CONSERVATION

Another way the DNR acquires land for conservation purposes is through administration of the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT).

Announced by Gov. Eric Holcomb in 2022, NLCT is funded through \$25 million from the state's American Rescue Plan allocation, making it the largest single infusion of state dollars into conservation in Indiana history. NLCT serves much the same local purpose as BHCT, but with no limit on the funding that can be requested for a specific project.

The first of what will be a long list of acquisitions via NLCT was a conservation easement on 570 acres of undisturbed forestland that, like Big Walnut, is also in Putnam County. Located west of Greencastle and now called Fern Station, the acquisition was described in detail in the News & Notes section of the September/October 2023 issue of Outdoor Indiana.

Speaking at last June's announcement of the accomplishment, Gov. Holcomb said, “When I think about this land, I couldn't be more thrilled we're preserving the natural wonders of Hoosier landscapes like these ... we are preserving land not just for today, but for generations of future Hoosiers to enjoy, protecting habitats and promoting quality of life.”

The biodiverse forest provides another safe harbor for cerulean warblers, as well as habitat for Eastern box turtles, a high-density population of Kentucky warblers, and, true to the tract's name, many diverse species of ferns. Now owned by CILTI, the land was purchased through a 3:1 state/partner match, with \$3.1 million funded by NLCT and more than \$1 million funded by donors to CILTI.

Partners that helped CILTI raise its required match included the Efroymsen Family Fund, Herbert Simon Family Foundation, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Meyer Family Fund, Sam Shine Foundation, TNC, Putnam County Community Foundation, Indiana Native Plant Society, Amos Butler Audubon Society, and more than 30 individual CILTI donors.

“This property has been on our wish list since first exploring it in 2008 because of its size, pristine condition and rich biodiversity,” said Cliff Chapman, CILTI president and CEO. “Plus, it's near another protected property—Fern Cliff Nature Preserve (which is owned by TNC).

“Anytime you increase the critical mass of protected land, you provide a safer place for wildlife and plants to thrive.”

As required of NLCT-funded projects, CILTI is working to create opportunities for outdoor recreation at Fern Station.

As detailed in News & Notes on page 10, NLCT also helped make possible the acquisition of the 158 acres of upland prairie and wetland now known as the Buchanan Unit to add to Mallard Roost Wetland Conservation Area in Noble County.

For more on NLCT, see on.IN.gov/next-level-conservation-trust.

If you have land you might want to protect through any of these programs, call 317-234-3419 or email tlaycock@dnr.IN.gov. □

Email mbenson@dnr.IN.gov.





MORE PROPERTY PROTECTED

VIA BENJAMIN HARRISON CONSERVATION TRUST

CE=Conservation Easement

SOUTH ADAMS TRAIL: Adams County, 5.4 acres, CE. The tract lies about a half mile north of the existing trail just south of County Road 700 South, within Berne's city limits. The current trail is complete from C.R. West 850 South nearly to North Drive along U.S. 27 in Geneva. The tract is part of what's needed for the planned extension of the trail to Lehman Park, which is in Berne.

LAKE COUNTY PARKS: City of Hobart, 40 acres. The acquired tract lies within the city's nature district. Thirty acres is forest and wetlands. Its trees include bur, white, red, and pin oaks, as well as shagbark hickory, black cherry, black walnut, hazelnut, and some native herbaceous species. Several vernal wetlands with a surprisingly low number of invasive woody species are scattered throughout this portion of the tract. The remaining 10 acres once included a former church picnic grounds and banquet hall, the latter of which has been demolished and removed. About half of this portion of the tract is reverting to wetlands. The acquisition provides a trailhead and nonmotorized trail access to the DNR/Shirley Heinze Land Trust nature preserves north of 49th Avenue. This land will also provide trail access from the same trailhead south to a parking lot at Robinson Lake Park that is managed by the city of Hobart, and to the Oak Savannah Trail, which Lake County Parks manages. The existing parking lot and entrance drive will be demolished and removed. A wetland restoration and enhancements of surrounding uplands will follow.

YELLOW BIRCH RAVINE NATURE PRESERVE: Crawford County, 17.61 acres. The parcel is an addition to the existing nature preserve in Patoka Township that is owned and managed by the Division of Nature Preserves. The acquisition protects characteristic features of the Crawford Upland, including exposed sandstone bedrock and southern oak forest. The uplands are nearly completely forested, containing areas of former farm fields that have regrown to young forest. Although the tract can currently be accessed only by going over railroad tracks, it adjoins land that DNR already owns and manages, which creates legal access to it. The land fits with the local Economic Development Commission's plans for creating an outdoor destination in the area.

SPRING CREEK SEEPS CONSERVATION AREA AND NATURE PRESERVE: Montgomery County, 43.76 acres. The acquired tract expands the preserve to approximately 394 acres of fen wetlands, artesian springs, and open oak woodlands on a rolling post-glacial landscape. Mill Creek flows through the property, past a few sandstone cliffs, and empties into nearby Sugar Creek. Sugar Creek is not only one of Indiana's highest priority conservation areas with abundant forests and streams, but also a popular recreational stream. The waterway also provides habitat for many threatened and endangered species and serves as a corridor for migrant bats and songbirds. When acquired, the land had already been prepared for another season of agricultural row cropping. Instead, 43,000



trees were planted in the spring of 2022 by the DNR Division of Forestry as part of Gov. Holcomb's Million Trees Initiative. The acquisition's reforestation will reduce the amount of sediment and contaminants entering the wetlands that are immediately downslope. The property was initially acquired by The Nature Conservancy to hold until funding from BHCT became available for bargain sale to DNR.

BOREAL FLATWOODS NATURE AREA/NORTH WOODS NATURE PRESERVE: LaPorte County, 38.22 acres. This addition to the nature area became DNR's 299th nature preserve last fall. Located within the Northwestern Morainal Natural Region, it has long been considered one of the best examples of boreal flatwoods in the state, having been identified in 1979 as a high-quality potential natural area then known as North Woods. The acquired property consists of forest, wetland, and conservative plant species, a term that refers to plants that are rare in most of today's prairies, don't do well in prairies that are heavily disturbed by grazing, and don't colonize quickly into fallowed fields. Some of the tract's

dominant tree species include red oak, white oak, red maple, American beech, pin oak, and black gum.

THOMASTOWN BOTTOMS NATURE PRESERVE/AUSTIN BOTTOMS CONSERVATION AREA: Scott County, 82.54 acres. A part of the Healthy Rivers Initiative (HRI), this acquisition by the Central Indiana Land Trust, Inc. (CILTI) borders both of these DNR-owned-and-managed properties. The tract is in the Muscatatuck River floodplain and is a high-quality site consisting of wet and wet-mesic floodplain forest types. It has wetland oak trees including pin and Shumard's swamp white. Also present are shellbark hickory, silver and red maple, sweetgum, and swamp cottonwood. It is located within the Scottsburg Lowland, an area of extensive flats underlain by silt and clay that holds water well. The acquisition increases public access to hunting, fishing, trapping, and birding, attracting in-state and out-of-state users. By funding acquisition of this area through BHCT, combined with past HRI projects, DNR is ensuring the protection of critical riparian wildlife habitat as well as the water quality and unique natural features of the Muscatatuck River.

VIA BHCT and NEXT LEVEL CONSERVATION TRUST

LAKE COUNTY PARKS: Schererville and St. John Township, 99.3 acres. This property contains 35 acres of forested emergent, wet prairie; scrub shrub; open water; and ephemeral wetlands. The acquisition protects 30 acres of remnant oak hickory savanna, 5 acres currently in agricultural production, and the remaining 30 acres currently in a past grassland

restoration. The site is part of a rolling topography in the Lake Hills area with almost 50 feet of grade change north to south. A planned northeast trailhead/trail extension on the property will tie into the Pennsy Greenway Trail in Schererville, and a planned local park will provide a north/south nonmotorized trail connection between 77th and 85th avenues.