



ACRES UPON ACRES

Trusts work to protect more land

Jeff Williams, who'd recently inherited the family farm and woods from his parents, was exploring Black Rock Nature Preserve along the Wabash River with a friend about eight years ago.

He saw "NICHES" on a sign, and the name intrigued him. After driving back to his Warren County home near Williamsport that was built in 1878, he looked up the land trust on the internet. His findings piqued his interest.

He talked with Gus Nyberg, NICHES executive director at the time, learning about how the nonprofit protected land for conservation in northeast Indiana. Bob Easter, the organization's stewardship director, who is profiled starting on page 12, eventually met with Williams to walk the land with him.

"He was so enthusiastic and so knowledgeable," Williams remembered. "He knew the name of every plant, and he could tell us all about them."

"That's when it became clear to us that NICHES could really take care of the property the way it needed to be taken care of, and that they should have some of the land."

The family's first bargain sale to NICHES, 84 acres, happened in 2018, via funding from what was then called the Indiana Heritage Trust (IHT), along with the Laura Hare Trust and the Roy Whistler Foundation (RWF). Two years later, NICHES bought 32 more acres from the family in another bargain sale.

Williams was so pleased with NICHES' care of the land that he and his siblings Bonnie and Huw decided NICHES should have the remaining 123 acres.

"We wanted them to have the land, but it wasn't clear if or when it would work out," Williams said. "We were prepared to wait."

A solution formed in 2022 with the creation of the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT). Funded through \$25 million from the state's American Rescue Plan allocation, it's the largest single infusion of state dollars into conservation in Indiana history.

NLCT serves a similar purpose to that of the Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust (BHCT), which is an enhanced version of IHT. It provides funding for the acquisition of land for conservation purposes but doesn't have BHCT's limit on funding that can be requested for a specific project. Shannon Stanis, who had succeeded the retired Nyberg, and Easter told Williams about how the NLCT could help them protect all of the land all at once. NICHES prepared and submitted an application that was approved in mid-2023.

The land means so much to the family because their forebearers acquired the original 31 acres in the mid-1800s. Jeff's parents, Grover and Mildred, eventually grew it to 250 acres, about 120 of which was tillable. Grover was once a farmer, but Jeff said when that was no longer economically feasible, they rented those acres to other farmers. Jeff, an IT

(Opposite) Ironweed blooms on land purchased by NICHES Land Trust at Williams Woods in Warren County. The 123-acre addition was acquired with the help of NLCT funds.



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.

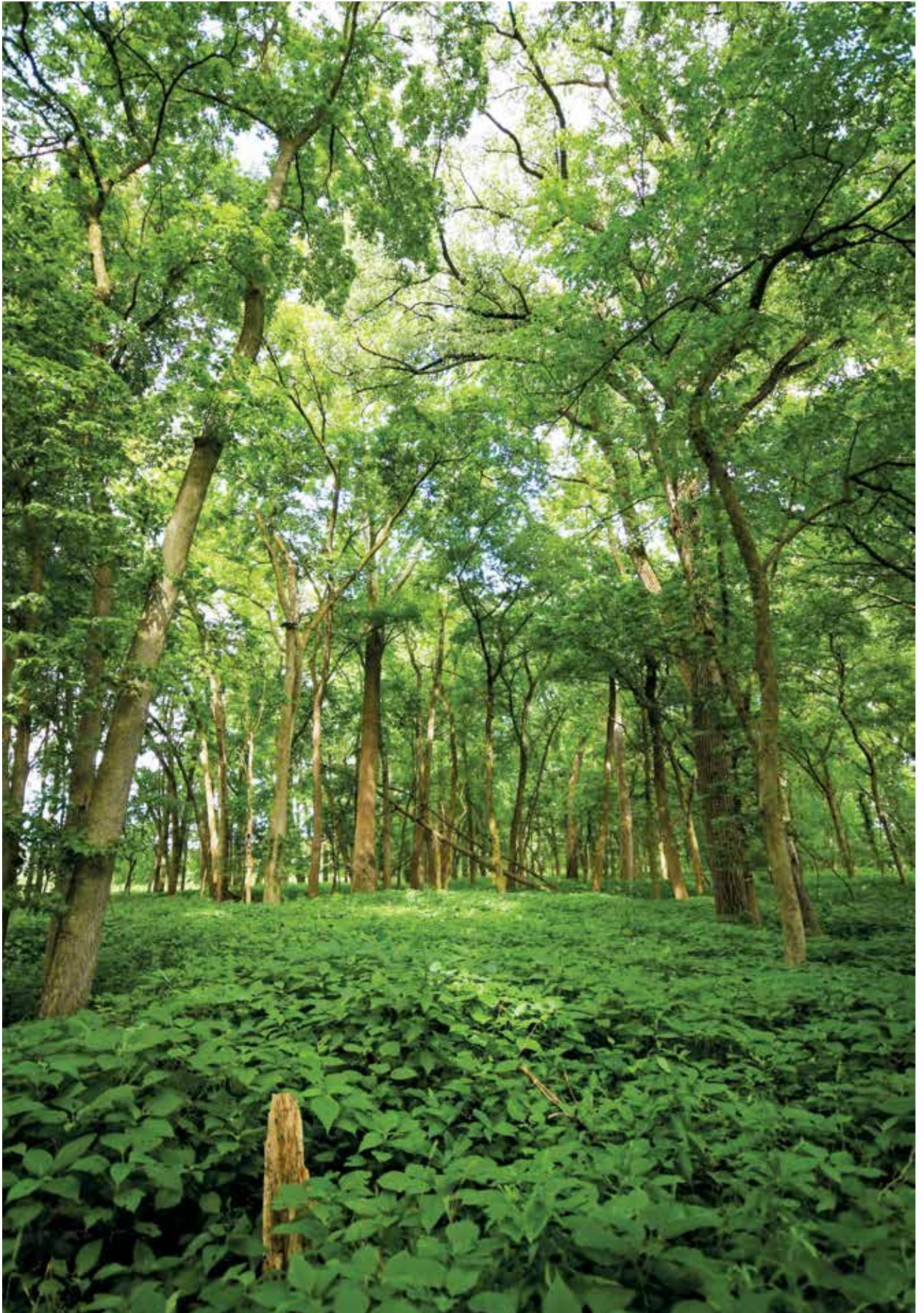


professional, grew up in his parents' house across the road. He sold that dwelling and 8 acres to friends and kept the 5 acres on which the family's older house stands, leaving the 237 acres that's now protected in perpetuity by NICHES.

"Both of my parents were church ministers, but they were also early conservationists in this area, so they would be happy with this," Williams said.

NICHES has converted a 26-acre ag field into prairie. Through that process, Williams said he learned the benefits of rain soaking into such ground as opposed to the runoff and erosion that can occur with farmland.

"There are so many benefits that I'm always learning more about," he said. "It's one of those rare situations where everybody wins—I certainly have because NICHES' property



is 50 meters from my front porch. I can still go there if I'd like, even though I don't own it, so the family is very happy."

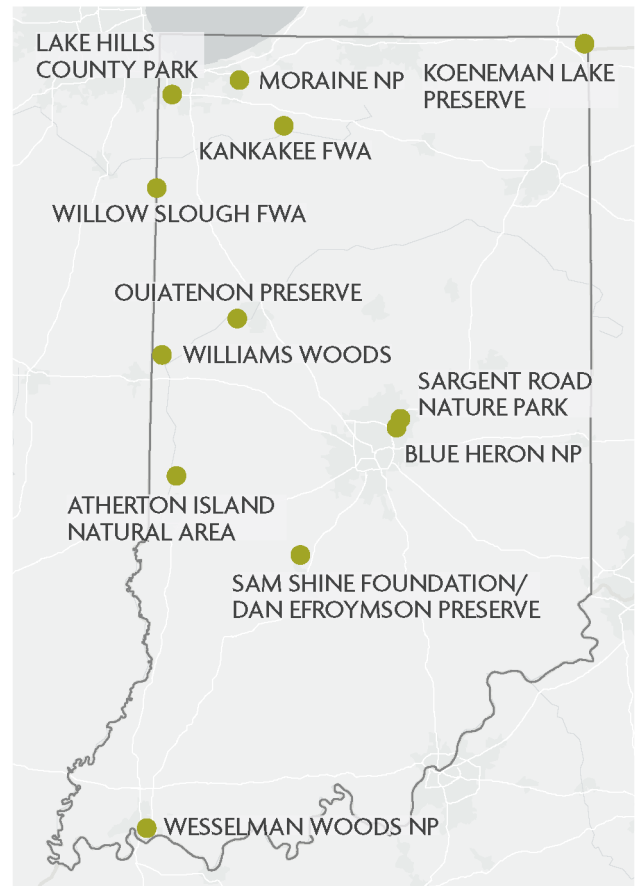
Each NLCT project encourages local participation by requiring a \$3:1 match. The match can be provided by local governmental, nonprofit or philanthropic organizations; private or corporate donors; or bargain sale. In the Williams' latest bargain sale, additional support came from the Central Indiana Land Trust, the RWF, and the Warren County Community Foundation.

"Expanding this preserve turns Williams Woods into more of a destination in a part of Warren County where there is not much protected land open to the public," Easter said. "Visitors can spend hours exploring the open oak woodland/savanna restorations as they develop and the health of the remnant acres is improved through prescribed fire and removal of invasive species."

A 35-acre woodland on the tract boasts what Easter calls "excellent populations of bur oak and chinquapin oak, including some massive old open-grown trees and a wide variety of age/size classes of both species, with healthy native grass and herbaceous species populations surrounding them."

Another feature of the tract is the presence of a few prairie species and several native thicket species that include hazelnut, American plum, prickly-ash, elderberry, and native prairie rose.

"These species, along with historical records of several prairie species collected by Charles Deam (Indiana's first State



PROPERTIES PROTECTED VIA BHCT AND/OR NLCT

(Opposite) A part of the 91.3 acres acquired by the Ouatemon Preserve through BHCT buffers the Wabash River. (Below) A part of the 13 acres acquired through BHCT that expands Moraine Nature Preserve.





Forester) on an adjacent parcel in the early 20th century, point to these acres having been bur oak savanna historically. “

That explains the reasoning behind the prairie restoration Williams noted earlier. NICHES has also planted an 8-acre thicket over a couple of small fields in the second tract it purchased and will continue restoration work across 84 currently farmed acres of the newest addition to the preserve after removing invasive species.

“Without the major support provided by NLCT it would have taken multiple purchases over several years to complete our purchase of the historic Williams family farm, which has been our intent since the first parcel was acquired and the Williams family showed mutual interest in long-term protection of the land,” Easter said.

More about NLCT is at on.IN.gov/next-level-conservation-trust.

ANOTHER TRUSTY SUCCESS STORY

A prime example of successful use of BHCT funding this past year was the acquisition of 91.3 acres along the Wabash River in West Lafayette by the Ouiatenon Preserve Inc. The preserve is an RWF project with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association and The Archaeological Conservancy (TAC) that protects the archaeological remains of the 18th-century Fort Ouiatenon, which was a French base for trading fur with the surrounding tribes of those times and the associated native village sites in the area.

Before adding its newest parcel, the preserve included the site of the original fort and the nearly 200 acres surrounding it. A significant portion of funding for that real estate came from the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust, which the NLCT succeeded, and the IHT, with matching contributions from the RWF and TAC.

In addition to protecting the unique, important, and nationally significant archaeological sites, the preserve is simultaneously creating a nature preserve that will improve the environmental and ecological health along the Wabash River. The latest addition is a giant step in that direction, in addition to preserving known and potentially to-be-discovered archaeological sites.

“As the mission for the preservation of the Fort area and its surroundings has grown, we have identified areas that are between the current preserve and this piece of property that have significant archaeological value,” said Colby Bartlett, the preserve’s executive director, who was this magazine’s Hoosier Profile in the September/October issue last year.

He noted two purposes for acquiring the land. The first was as part of the larger plan regarding the development and extension of the Wabash Heritage Trail. The second was to have a chance to fill in the blanks between it and the current preserve later, if and when the opportunity arises.

“Someday, and it may not be in our lifetime or maybe a couple of generations from now, the desire is for that trail to go all the way down through that whole area,” Bartlett said. “(The acquisition) also gets that property under the collective ownership of the public and gives us a beachhead for hopefully the pieces that are between it and the current preserve.”

(Opposite, from top) Mud Creek flows through Blue Heron Nature Preserve. A 99.3-acre tract was acquired for Lake Hills County Park using a combination of BHCT and NLCT funds. (Above) Sargent Road Nature Park.



In addition, the parcel “is extraordinarily beautiful,” he said.

The preserve also provides the multitude of migratory birds that use the Wabash River as a primary flyway with nesting and roosting habitat and supports a host of flora and fauna, including deer, bobcats, wild turkey, fox, raccoon, and a lot of amphibians.

When the riverside tract became available, it attracted the attention of developers. Having BHCT funding available allowed Bartlett’s group to get it before they could. Without BHCT, he said the chances of doing so were probably zero.

“The application process was pretty straightforward. We put down our case, why we thought it was important to acquire and preserve this land as part of the larger plan ... and how that falls into the broader plans of other organizations trying to restore the whole area of the river valley as habitat for native flora and fauna and to improve water quality in the Wabash River.”

Along with its various other initiatives, the preserve is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to augment pollinator support plantings on the property.

Learn more about BHCT at on.IN.gov/dnr-land.

SOUND GOOD?

If you have questions about either of these programs, email Mark Becker, director of the Division of Land Acquisition, mbecker@dnr.IN.gov. □

Email Marty Benson, mbenson@dnr.IN.gov.



MORE PROPERTY PROTECTED

VIA BENJAMIN HARRISON & NEXT LEVEL CONSERVATION TRUSTS

LAKE HILLS COUNTY PARK: Lake County, 99.3 acres. This parcel within the town of Schererville and St. John Township harbors 24.3 acres of various wetland types, 30 acres of remnant oak hickory savanna, 40 acres from a past Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) project, and 5 acres in agricultural production. The tract is 1 mile directly south of Hoosier Prairie Nature Preserve and provides natural open space for area residents along with a connection via a short sidewalk to the nearby Pennsy Greenway corridor that connects Crown Point with Chicago and is part of the Great American Rail Trail. Park development proposed for the site will provide public access, a parking lot, 2 miles of trails, a playground, an outdoor classroom, educational programs, flood control, stream and wetland restoration, and restoration of native plant communities.

VIA NEXT LEVEL CONSERVATION TRUST

WESSELMAN WOODS NATURE PRESERVE: Vanderburgh County, 41.57 acres. This is an addition to the southern edge of the previously 240-acre nature preserve, which is a National Natural Landmark owned by the city of Evansville and operated by the Wesselman Nature Society. That nonprofit plans to develop the land into an old-growth, multi-strata forest comparable to the nature preserve's current adjoining protected forest to create a healthy

forest buffer zone. The current forest composition of the acquired tract includes tulip poplars, sweet gum, sycamores, cottonwood, ashes, and a large oak in the high canopy. Hackberry and young sycamore are densely situated in the mid-canopy, and the understory contains a few maples as well as loads of spicebush and invasive species.

WILLOW SLOUGH FISH & WILDLIFE AREA (FWA): Newton County, 41 acres. The addition to the prior 9,956 acres of land and 1,200 acres of water comprising the FWA borders its previous eastern and southern boundaries. The land is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and planted to a prairie mix. This project included a matching donation by the Roy Whistler Foundation.

KANKAKEE FISH & WILDLIFE AREA (FWA): Starke County, 276.75 acres. Much of this addition to the previously 4,295-acre FWA is enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) program and was previously operated as a waterfowl hunting club. The tract contains a 1,600-tree planting, diverse vegetation, small ponds, shallow wetlands, and flooded timber. Agricultural fields are scattered throughout. The Kankakee River borders the northwest side of the parcel, the ditches of which provide floodwater storage. Two water control pumps are located along the river to facilitate flooding and draining parts of the property along with three stop-log structures to manipulate water elevations. Plans for the parcel include wildlife habitat enhancement and invasive species control within the scope of WRE, along with allowing public access for managed hunting and fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, and nature photography.

SAM SHINE FOUNDATION/DAN EFROYMSON PRESERVE: Monroe County, 107.93 acres. This addition to Sycamore Land Trust's Beanblossom Creek Conservation Area fills in a corner of



the existing preserve, moving closer to the goal of connecting it with Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve (NP). Before the acquisition, the Shine/Efroymson Preserve encompassed 613 acres, 566 of which Sycamore purchased with Bicentennial Nature Trust assistance. The parcel's location on the south side of Beanblossom Creek allows Sycamore to protect almost one-half mile of the creek on both sides. The federally endangered Indiana bat and Northern long-eared bat have been documented along the creek at nearby Beanblossom Bottoms NP. The tract is a mixture of upland hardwoods and open field areas. About 79 acres are forested and 26 acres, mostly along the creek and in the floodplain, have been used for hay production. There are a few small, mowed fields on top of the forested ridge, and mowed trails provide access through the uplands and to the fields. Sycamore will restore the fields to forest or open wetlands and continue to mow access trails for management and public use.

ATHERTON ISLAND NATURAL AREA: Parke County, 63.6 acres. The parcel is an addition to Ouabache Land Conservancy's previously 188-acre natural area north of an area along County Road West 800 South in Rosedale, east of Lyford. A spring-fed stream originates on the tract, flowing through the major ravine and eventually joining with two other streams within the prior boundaries of the natural area to form a single stream that flows into the Wabash River. A Central Till Plain dry mesic upland forest with its characteristic flora of mosses and flowering plants occupies the tract's ridges. A powerline extends through the south side and middle of the west end of the tract. Plans are to plant that area in appropriate native vegetation in the tillable acreage.

BLUE HERON NATURE PRESERVE: Marion County, 11.9 acres. This tract was acquired by Mud Creek Conservancy and received DNR Conservation Easement protection.

SARGENT ROAD NATURE PARK: Marion County, 26.33 acres. This tract previously acquired by Mud Creek Conservancy (MCC) received DNR Conservation Easement protection and served as a matching contribution for the MCC acquisition referenced in the prior entry. Combined, the two properties provide more than 2 miles of nature trails in urban surroundings for Hoosiers to enjoy.

KOENEMAN LAKE PRESERVE: Steuben County, 25.2 acres. This acquisition by the Clear Lake Township Conservancy (CLTC) in the township for which it is named moves CLTC closer to its goal of protecting a roughly 37-acre area of which it already owned 11.7 acres. The acquired tract includes a stream, small lake, wetlands, and wooded uplands. CLTC will eventually provide public access and recreation on the tract, protect wetlands, and improve water quality flowing into Clear Lake and ultimately to Lake Erie as well as providing the opportunity for the restoration of an open oak woodland ecosystem. The prior owner, Clear Lake Lutheran Church, will continue to own the 4.14 adjoining acres for operation of its Community Memorial Park.

VIA BENJAMIN HARRISON CONSERVATION TRUST

MORaine NATURE PRESERVE: Porter County, 13 acres. This acquisition by the DNR was previously an inholding on the north side of the nature preserve bounded by two parcels that were previously purchased using BHCT. Its mostly mesic upland forest provides access to the northern half of the nature preserve.