

PROTECTING LAND IN PERPETUITY



Land Acquisition Division
makes it happen

A fen is a specific type of wetland. Few fens are found in Indiana, and usually they are far between. So, when a roughly 58-acre tract contains two fens of different types, as an area in Wabash County does, news of them spreads quickly through the ecological community.

This previously private property, which ACRES Land Trust (acreslandtrust.org) bought at auction in October of 2022 and months later dubbed Disko Fen Nature Preserve, was documented long before but most recently in the 1969 publication “Natural Areas in Indiana and Their Preservation.” As a result, DNR and ACRES were aware of the land years before it became available.

“The fact that we have two different types of fens in a fairly small area in close proximity to one another is really neat,” said Evan Hill, ACRES’ stewardship director.

Fens have alkaline, neutral, or only slightly acid peaty soil. Each of these fens currently covers about a third of an acre. One has a base that’s characteristic of a dry lakebed. It’s made up of the accumulation of decayed remains of dead crustaceans over thousands of years on the cool wetland floor. As a result, it contains a lot of calcium from the crustaceans’ shells, which classifies it as a marly fen.

The other fen is elevated, which is highly unusual.

“Most of the fens we see are at the base of slopes, kind of toward more open wetlands, and then there are also hanging fens that occur on the side of slopes,” Hill said. “This one is kind of perched on a terrace.

“It’s a shallow depression that has good sedge diversity and a lot of forbs in it.” A forb is a herbaceous flowering plant other than a grass.

A sedge meadow surrounds both, and the property contains a few plant species that are on the state watch list, including swamp lousewort, lesser fringed gentian, and shrubby cinquefoil.

“We think there’s likely some other listed species out there, and once we begin our restoration work and become more familiar with the property, I think we’ll uncover those,” Hill said.

Within two weeks of learning of the auction, ACRES posted the winning bid, thanks to its ability to move quickly, Hill said. To prepare for the opportunity, Hill contacted DNR to get the ball rolling for funding a conservation easement after the acquisition was completed.

A conservation easement gives DNR certain monitoring and enforcement rights to protect the property in perpetuity and provides for public access. According to Mark Becker, director of the Division of Land Acquisition, which administers the President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust (PBHCT), this approach gives DNR the ability to help protect

important places for conservation and recreation without taking on the responsibilities of day-to-day management.

“Funding sources like (PBHCT) are extremely important, especially for high quality areas like this that didn’t have any protection on them before,” Hill said.

The acquired land adds to more than 1,000 acres currently protected by DNR and ACRES within a 15-mile radius of Disko Fen.

The property is just one of many examples of how PBHCT, first established by the Indiana General Assembly in 1992, works as the DNR’s primary means of protecting land for conservation.

The division also administers the Next Level Conservation Trust (NLCT). Depending on the situation, the funding in both programs is used to acquire land for additions to DNR-managed state parks, state forests, fish & wildlife areas, and nature preserves. As with Disko Fen, DNR often



WANT TO CONSERVE LAND?

Put your money where your interest is. You can donate to PBHCT 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 PBHCT by buying an Environmental License Plate at **enviropate.IN.gov**. The cost of the plate is \$40, \$25 of which goes to PBHCT. All proceeds are used for conservation protection.



(Opposite) Fen grass of Parnassus blooms at Disko Fen in Wabash County. Fens are fed with groundwater and typically have richer nutrients while bogs, by comparison, fill with rain and are nutrient-poor.



(Above) Wyatt Williams, DNR plant community ecologist, surveys Disko Fen. A turbulent phosphila moth caterpillar at Disko Fen. (Opposite) Short's aster blooms on a 198-acre addition to Green's Bluff Nature Preserve.

partners with local parks departments, nonprofit land trusts, and recreational trails groups to protect land through a conservation easement.

Whether the state acquires the land directly or protects it via a conservation easement, Land Acquisition staff members carefully guide each project through a rigorous process. Title work is reviewed for liens and encumbrances, and the property's legal description is mapped by the State Land Office. An appraisal is reviewed to ensure the State is paying a fair price for the land.

Once a purchase offer is accepted, approvals must be secured from the DNR director, the Indiana Department of Administration, the State Budget Agency, and the Attorney General.

"Finally, a closing is scheduled, and the deed or conservation easement is recorded," Becker said.

NEXT LEVEL LAND CONSERVATION

White oak trees, many reaching from 110 to 130 feet high with diameters of 30 inches or more, dominate an upland 198-acre tract of land in Owen County.

Last year, TNC used funds from the NLCT to acquire a conservation easement through DNR to protect the tract.

"There are not many places in our southern Indiana forests that you'll see something as nice in terms of white oaks," said Emily Biesecker, director of land strategies for the Indiana chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) since July of 2021.

In early 2022, TNC bought the property, which it had tracked for availability for a number of years, not only because of its exceptional quality, but also because it connected with its Green's Bluff Nature Preserve's southwestern-most boundary.

The family who most recently owned the property learned about the possibility of working with TNC from the consulting private forester they hired and through the land's enrollment in DNR's Classified Forest and Wildlands (CFW) program since the 1950s.

"(The forester) said, 'you've got something incredible here; as you are thinking about this, long term, it really should be conserved, really should be protected,'" Biesecker said. "As I understand it, they did what their professional forester said to do with it in terms of managing it over those decades."

Those directions included how to manage multiple sustainable timber harvests. According to Biesecker, at least six were conducted, removing a cumulative thousands of trees.

"They were done in a way that promoted the growth of healthy trees in their place over five or six decades," she said. "With expert guidance from professional foresters and the CFW program, those harvests resulted in a really high quality forest."

"TNC's interest here was in an oak forest that was really healthy that we feel we can keep really healthy as we own and manage it and continue to provide the wildlife habitat that an oak forest provides."

One main means of management TNC plans, both on this tract and elsewhere in the nature preserve, on the appropriate sites, is bringing in prescribed fire to mimic the effect of periodic, low-intensity fires that were allowed to happen naturally for thousands of years, creating space and allowing sunlight in so new oaks can develop.

"We hope to create a forest structure that's more open, which makes it easier for birds and bats to fly and forage and makes it the system we want it to be for those species, which is also the system that these oak-dominated upland sites should be," Biesecker said. "It is really hard to maintain oak dominance without fire."

She expects whip-poor-wills and cerulean warblers to be among the many migratory and resident birds that will visit such habitat. TNC's work will also maintain or improve summer maternal habitat for a number of forest-dwelling bats, particularly Indiana bats and Northern long-eared bats, both of which are federally endangered, as well as the more populous little brown bats.

The tract currently lacks parking or trails, but accommodations can be made if you want to go there while such features are being considered.

"You are welcome to reach out to one of our TNC land stewards to arrange a visit, just to make sure we can manage cars, impact on neighbors, and things like that," Biesecker said. Contact information is on the organization's website, nature.org/indiana.

A convenient visit to the rest of the nature preserve can be made just east of the acquisition, along Porter Ridge Road, where you'll find the parking lot and trailhead for the preserve's south section. There, TNC teamed with the Hoosier Hikers Council to complete a 5-mile trail that opened in October of last year.



PBHCT BY THE NUMBERS



PROJECTS COMPLETED FY 2025: **14**
3 fee purchases
11 conservation easements

PROJECTS COMPLETED SINCE 1992:

577



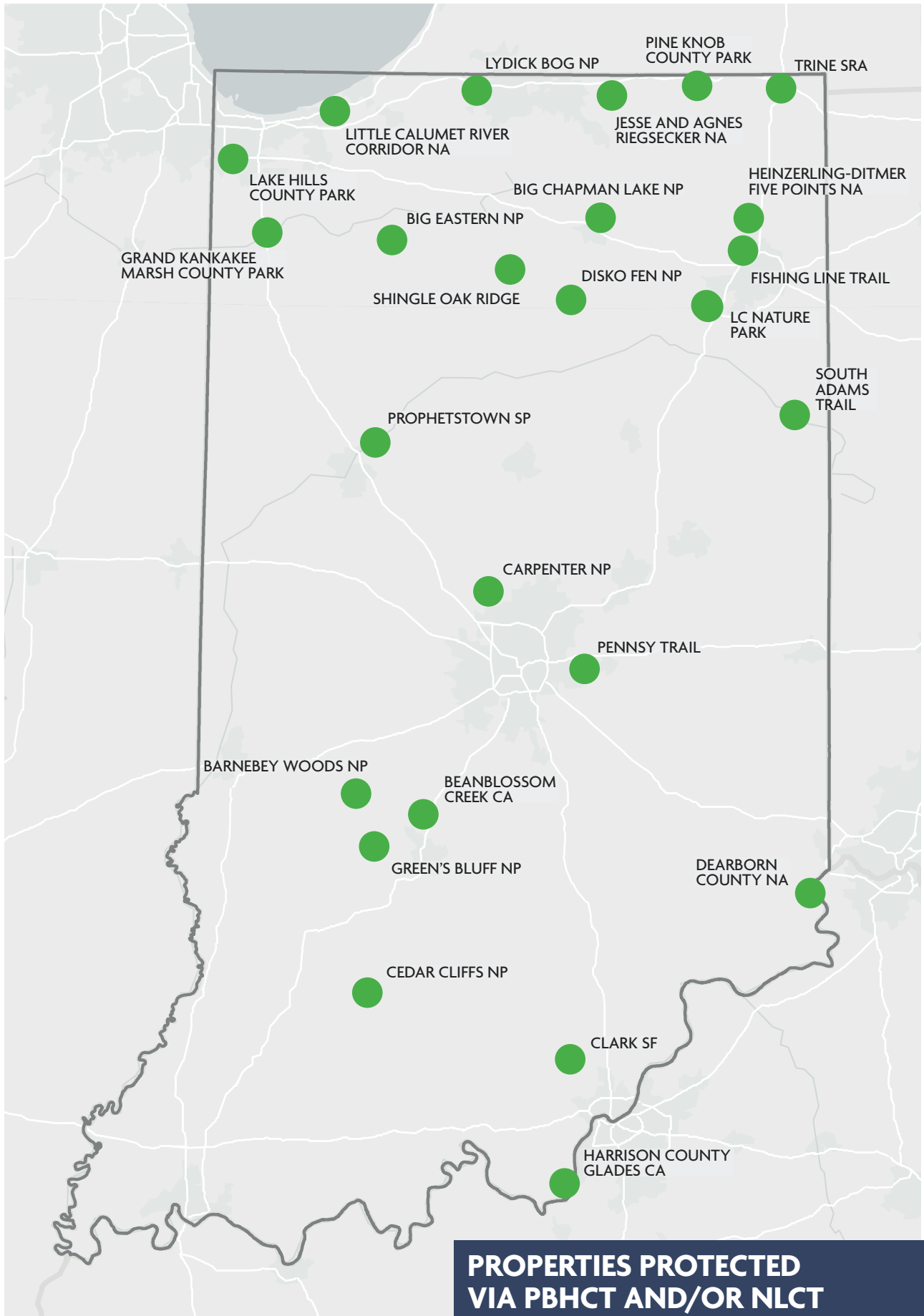
ACRES PROTECTED FY 2025: **695**
ACRES PROTECTED SINCE 1992:
73,670

AVERAGE PRICE PER ACRE FY 2025:

\$3,891.70



LICENSE PLATES SOLD FY 2025:
46,620 5.8% increase from
FY 2024 and most plates
sold since FY 2017





Sand prairie and sand savanna dominate the recently protected portion of Shirley Heinze Land Trust's Big Eastern Nature Preserve in Starke County. The previous owners managed the land as a nature area.

Overall, in addition to impressive trees, the nature preserve contains steep bluffs, interesting rock formations, and lush forest along Racoon Creek. Biesecker pointed out that the preserve is close to a lot of people, being a half-hour from Bloomington and just south of McCormick's Creek State Park near Spencer.

Another notable conservation easement acquired through NLCT, this one for the Shirley Heinze Land Trust (SHLT), protects a 423-acre tract in Starke County that features remnant black oak savanna, sand prairie, emergent marsh, riparian habitat, and oak-dominant woodlands.

Similar to the addition to Green's Bluff, the property to be known as Big Eastern Nature Preserve was managed as a nature area by the previous owners for more than a half-century before being acquired in 2025.

"The prior owners were very committed to that concept, and they started doing restoration, especially on some of the open sandy areas that had been agricultural fields," said Doug Botka, SHLT's stewardship ecologist.

They also focused on attracting pollinators.

"There is incredible diversity there in terms of the insect life," Botka said.

The pollinator draws present include Western sunflower, rough blazing star, sand phlox, goat's rue, and more. There's also an Atlantic coastal disjunct, hyssop-leaved hedge-nettle.

Oddly missing are asters and goldenrods, which late-season pollinators need.

"We are focusing on getting those two genera out there," Botka said.

To do that and more, SHLT is planting a 10-acre section

with \$10,000 worth of native seeds obtained through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We are doing so within the same framework of the plants already out there, increasing their density," he said.

Like TNC with Green's Bluff, SHLT was aware of the quality of the tract long before acquiring it. The prior owners used to invite botanists to visit on a regular basis, and botanists talk to each other about such places, so the list of those wanting to visit grew steadily.

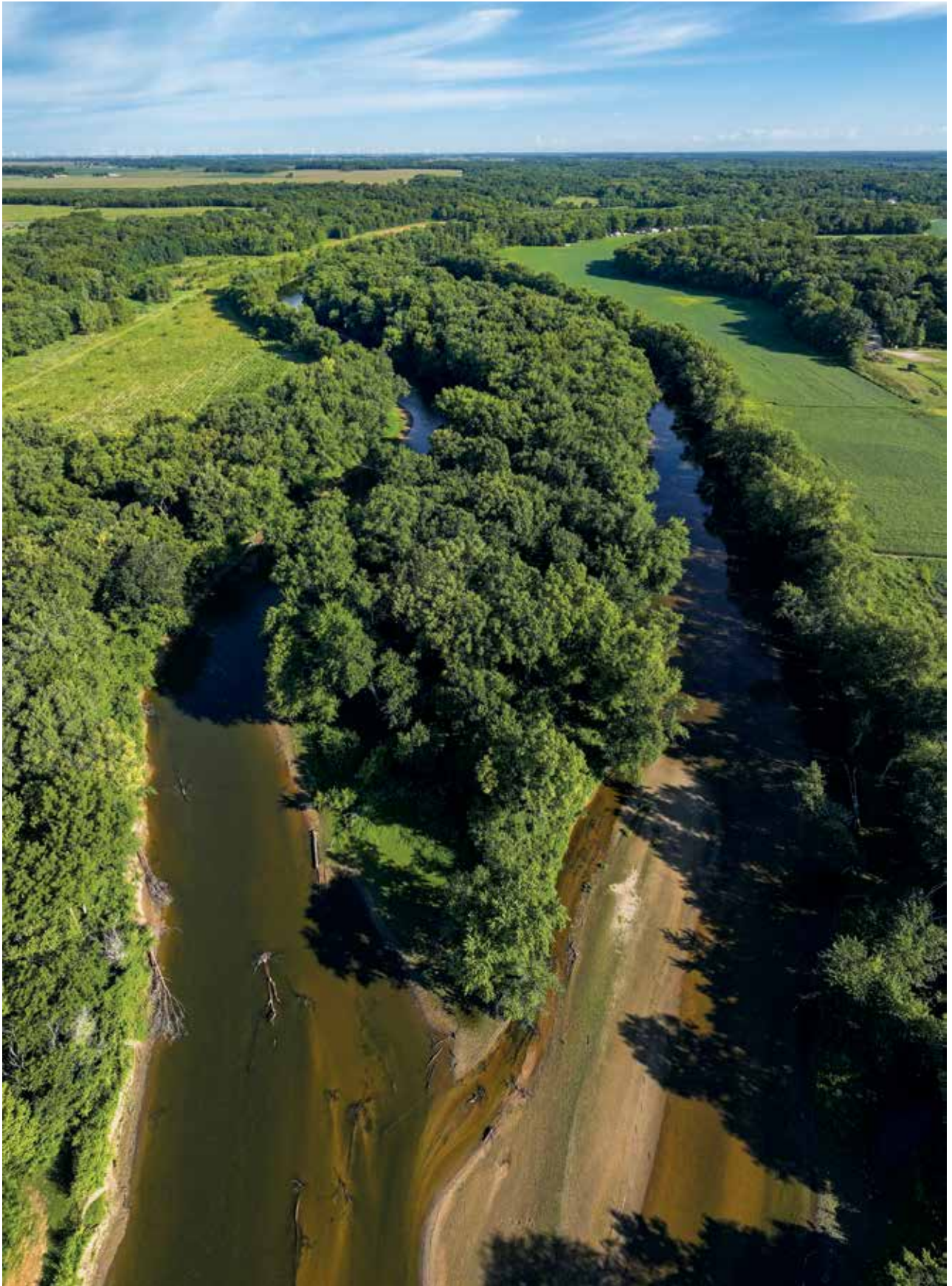
Identifying the then-newly created NLCT as a potential funding source, SHLT executive director Kris Krouse, who had been in casual conversation with the owners for years, asked if they were ready to sell.

"We had been excited about this property for a really long time, and the funding really helped us move it across the finish line," said Bridget Harrison, SHLT's deputy director. "We are really excited to make improvements, add accessibility, and get folks out," something she said is key to SHLT's overall plans for establishing more of a presence and increasing support in Starke County, a relatively new area for the organization.

The NLCT was established through a one-time \$25 million appropriation by the General Assembly in 2021. The funding was used to preserve and protect important conservation, recreation, and historic areas throughout Indiana. All available NLCT funding has been committed, resulting in the preservation of more than 3,500 acres across the state, making PBHCT the DNR's now primary tool for protecting land. In perpetuity, of course. □

Email mbenson@dnr.IN.gov.





(Opposite from top) A sandstone bluff at Cedar Cliffs Nature Preserve. A 27.6-acre addition to Trine State Recreation Area.
(Above) The 15.7-acre addition to Prophetstown State Park of “Merkel Island” in the Tippecanoe River.

MORE PROPERTY PROTECTED

VIA PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON CONSERVATION TRUST

CEDAR CLIFFS NATURE PRESERVE: Martin County, 22.4 acres. This addition to the Cedar Cliffs Nature Preserve sits along the White River just north of Shoals. Now the property of the Division of Fish, Wildlife & Nature Preserves, the parcel contains rare and endangered plants. It is not open to the public at this time.

BIG CHAPMAN LAKE NATURE PRESERVE: Kosciusko County, 1.7 acres. This marl beach prairie wetland acquired from ACRES Land Trust by the Division of Fish, Wildlife & Nature Preserves expanded the nature preserve to 147 acres, but more importantly, it provides needed management access via road frontage from the north. Protecting this wetland provides immediate benefits to natural lakes within the watershed of the Tippecanoe River, a priority conservation stream, directly benefitting water quality, fisheries, and recreation.

PROPHETSTOWN STATE PARK: Tippecanoe County, 15.7 acres. Called “Merkel Island,” this property is 0.7 miles north of the Tippecanoe River’s confluence with the Wabash River on the east side of the park. This acquisition has been a priority of the Division of State Parks for many years. The parcel is believed to be one of the islands referenced in the chronicles of the Battle of Tippecanoe.

PBHCT CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

FISHING LINE TRAIL: Allen County, 3.9 acres. This conservation easement protects a strip of former railroad property that runs south from Dupont Road to Till Road for the purpose of extending the Fishing Line Trail. The name of the trail is taken from the nickname of the railroad that once ran through the area. The property is owned and managed by the city of Fort Wayne.

PENNSY TRAIL: Hancock County, 10.6 acres. This conservation easement helped fund the county’s acquisition of property to narrow the gap between the Cumberland and Greenfield portions of the Pennsy Trail, which is part of the National Road Heritage Trail system. The property is owned and managed by Hancock County.

SOUTH ADAMS TRAIL: Adams County, 1 acre. This conservation easement helped fund a 1/3-mile extension of the trail near the city of Berne. This section of the trail begins in Geneva, crosses the Wabash River via the reconstruction and restoration of two 1895 railroad bridges, and extends to Berne’s southern city limits. The property is owned and managed by South Adams Trail, Inc.

GRAND KANKAKEE MARSH COUNTY PARK: Lake County, 7.4 acres. This conservation easement enabled Lake County Parks to acquire an inholding bordered on three sides by the park. The park now comprises approximately 2,007 acres along the Kankakee River in Lake, Porter, and Newton counties. The property is owned and managed by the Lake County Parks & Recreation Board.

BARNEBEY WOODS NATURE PRESERVE: Owen County, 160 acres. This conservation easement enabled Sycamore Land Trust Inc. to acquire and protect a tract consisting of contiguous woodland in the Crawford Upland section of the Shawnee Hills. It’s bordered by a large parcel of Owen-Putnam State Forest and was dedicated as a nature preserve in January.

DEARBORN COUNTY NATURE AREA: Dearborn County, 147 acres. DNR acquired a conservation easement from Oak Heritage Conservancy for establishment of a natural area in a part of the state where few other natural areas have been permanently preserved. The property is wooded upland of second growth forest and is located less than a mile from the Ohio River near Aurora.

HEINZERLING-DITMER FIVE POINTS NATURAL AREA: DeKalb County, 62.4 acres. DNR acquired a conservation easement from ACRES Land Trust for an addition to the Heinzerling Family Five Points Nature Preserve. The property includes wetlands, several small ponds, and 2,000 feet of Black Creek, which is a major tributary in the Cedar Creek Watershed. Upland woods on the property include red oak, white oak, sugar maple, American beech, and black cherry.

LITTLE CALUMET RIVER CORRIDOR NATURE AREA: Porter County, 157 acres. DNR acquired a conservation easement from the Shirley Heinze Land Trust (SHLT) for an addition to the east branch of the nature area. The tract is adjacent to more than 2,000 acres of land permanently protected by the DNR, the National Park Service, and SHLT. This preserved acreage is part of the East Branch of the Little Calumet River Conservation Corridor, a Bicentennial Nature Trust corridor that connects with the main unit of Indiana Dunes National Park and Lake Michigan. SHLT intends to manage the property as a natural area.

LAKE HILLS COUNTY PARK: Lake County, 28 acres. The conservation easement funded an addition to the park, which comprises more than 120 acres and allows it to connect with the Pennsy Greenway Trail. The majority of the



tract is wooded, primarily composed of white, red, black, and bur oaks along with shagbark and bitternut hickories and some native herbaceous species. The property also includes at least 2 acres of wetlands. The property is owned and managed by the Lake County Parks & Recreation Board.

PINE KNOB COUNTY PARK: LaGrange County, 21 acres. The DNR acquired a conservation easement from the LaGrange County Parks Department to fund an addition to the more than 254-acre park. The newly protected tract comprises approximately 10 acres of wetlands, including a pond that is fed by Meter Lake as well as the wetlands of Pine Knob. The rest of the parcel consists of oak and hickory woodlands with evergreen plantings. The acquisition increases the recreational value of the county's most consistently used park.

VIA NEXT LEVEL CONSERVATION TRUST

CLARK STATE FOREST: Clark County, 40 acres. The acquired tract is upland forestland next to the state forest. It is located in the Knobs and features high dry ridges, steep slopes, and deep ravines.

TRINE STATE RECREATION AREA: Steuben County, 27.6 acres. Consisting of savanna, prairie, and wetland, the acquired property is located between two managed natural areas and Interstate 69. Adjacent habitat has been restored to prairie and savanna, and this property has similar restoration potential in addition to providing a natural vegetation buffer between the natural land and the interstate and between the natural lake chain and adjacent disturbed soils. The property is managed by the Division of State Parks.

NLCT CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

BEANBLOSSOM CREEK CONSERVATION AREA: Monroe County, 26.4 acres. The conservation easement connects Sycamore Land Trust's Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve and Restle Natural Area, filling in a critical corner of floodplain that borders U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Restle Unit of Muscatatuck National Wildlife Refuge. Sycamore is restoring the pasture to bottomland forest and/or open wetlands. Doing so will add to the contiguous habitat present and improve the water quality of the floodplain and adjacent nature preserves.

CARPENTER NATURE PRESERVE: Boone County, 170.7 acres. The conservation easement allows creation of a nature preserve by the Zionsville Parks and Recreation Department as a destination for walking trails, boardwalks, enhanced wetlands, woodlands, and prairies. The nature preserve will enhance existing wildlife habitats and provide for viewing of these habitats while teaching visitors of all ages about the natural environment.

HARRISON COUNTY GLADES CONSERVATION AREA: Harrison County, 200 acres. The conservation easement protects property that is an example of the glades' upland forest community type. The fully forested tract also boasts extensive road frontage on both sides of Rabbit Hash Road. The Nature Conservancy has worked for more than 30 years to acquire and protect land within the glades, a roughly 25,000-acre complex with four well-intact natural communities that also include limestone caves, upland forest, and second-order streams.

JESSE AND AGNES RIEGSECKER NATURAL AREA: Elkhart County, 202 acres. The conservation easement protects distinctive ecosystems including a high-quality fen wetland and bog-like system. Scattered black oak stands reveal the land's historical character. Thirty acres of oak and hickory forests grace the slopes, complemented by early successional fields. The property is owned and managed by ACRES Land Trust.

LC NATURE PARK: Allen and Huntington counties, 106.7 acres. LC Nature Park is located in the Little River Valley in southwestern Allen County and northeastern Huntington County. The conservation easement protects an addition on the west side of the park and features a 3.5-acre forested wetland, 9 acres of upland forest, and a large pasture area that will be used to graze bison.

LYDICK BOG NATURE PRESERVE: St. Joseph County, 93.8 acres. The conservation easement protects a preserve that boasts one of the few remaining bogs in Indiana and is easily accessible to residents of South Bend who seek opportunities for passive outdoor recreation. With more than 630 plant species identified, it is one of the Shirley Heinz Land Trust's most diverse properties. The acquisition increases its total protected acreage to 271 acres.

SHINGLE OAK RIDGE: Fulton County, 114.4 acres. The conservation easement protects property within one of ACRES Land Trust's new priority areas along the Tippecanoe River. The property is adjacent to DNR's Menominee Public Fishing Area and protects oak woodlands, floodplain forest, and an emergent wetland. ACRES intends to plant trees to restore an existing agricultural field to its native habitat. The property will be open to the public after habitat restoration has begun and a trail has been placed.