



THE SPROUT

NICHES LAND TRUST | SUMMER 2021 | VOLUME 25 ISSUE 3

Past Our Time as Stewards | Spring Creek Sanctuary | Flight of the Monarchs

Cover Painting "Virginia Bunchflower" By: Gabriela Sincich

"We have forgotten how to be good guests, how to walk lightly on the earth as its other creatures do." - Barbara Ward

Executive Director Update

Past Our Time as Stewards

In late June NICHES wrapped our annual Summer Adventure Camp for local kids 11 to 14 years old. Our nature camp program began 5 years ago in 2016 and has developed in sync with the organization's growth and increasing presence in the community. In the beginning our camp was only able to reach 4-6 children per week and its long term financial feasibility was regularly in question. As time passed and parents began recommending our camp to others it started to catch a wind behind its sails. 2019 was the first year that both weeks of camp completely filled up at our cap of 11 campers per week. Last year both weeks of camp filled up less than a month after registration was opened in January and we made the decision to add a 3rd week of camp. This year all 3 weeks were full by the start of camp and there were enough parents on the waitlist to fill a 4th week if we offered it. The growth our camp and organization have enjoyed over these past 5 years is a good sign for our ever changing community that holds nature as a central value. Being able to directly connect children to our local ecosystems helps ensure that they will continue to be protected and celebrated past our time as stewards.



Thank you to
this years camp
sponsors!



LAFAYETTE
URBAN MINISTRY



LAND VAL·UES

Meet our Summer Stewardship Crew

Zach Neff: Working as a seasonal steward with NICHES this summer has been an amazing opportunity that has taught me so much and allowed me numerous, unique experiences. Last summer I interned with NICHES, and I've been volunteering for two years. My work this year has focused on stewardship of the properties by working hands-on chemically and mechanically eradicating invasives, maintaining trails, protecting rare plants, and collecting and spreading native seeds to guide properties in the right direction. Through this role, I have gotten even more plant identification knowledge and a deeper understanding of how to restore and protect valuable ecosystems. I'm currently a Junior at Purdue University majoring in Natural Resources and Environmental Science. My time with NICHES has shaped my future and affected my outlook on conservation by reinvigorating my passion for nature and solidifying my future plans to pursue a career in land conservation and ecological restoration.



Shannon Felger: The past few months at NICHES have been a wonder-filled and inspiring journey in solidifying my career path in conservation. As a senior about to be thrown into the real world with a Natural Resources and Environmental Science degree, this internship has opened my eyes even further into the world of ecological restoration and the incredible impact a person can have in one summer on the ecosystems around them. This summer has had a focus on removing invasive species at some particularly beautiful properties, through which I've seen rare and even many endangered species of flora and fauna thriving. From Bushwacking thickets of honeysuckle, pollinating rare orchids, and exploring some of our local natural treasures with summer campers, working out in the field with NICHES has made me a lifelong land steward through and through and solidifying my future plans to pursue a career in land conservation and ecological restoration.

Jordan Young: This fall I will be entering my senior year of Environmental Science at Purdue, which means I have to start making serious decisions about what I want to do after graduation. I knew that I was getting tired of seeing people arguing about what to do for the environment and wanted to join those who were actually making huge improvements to it on a daily basis. This internship with NICHS offered the opportunity to join stewards in managing properties, learn about plant species native to the area, and see how the organization interacts with the public from volunteer workdays pulling invasive species to spending the day on the creek with summer camp kids. The most inspirational part of my summer has been spending time with the people working for/with NICHS. I have thoroughly enjoyed being around such respectable people who care about something enough to work through thick and thin to protect it.



Jackson Stoll: After working in retail management for a few years, I developed a longing to help the natural world. Through my contact with Justin, a NICHS Land Steward, I had the opportunity to drop everything and come intern under his supervision. I have since had the opportunity to learn about the field of nature conservation, develop my knowledge of native and invasive species, and understand the intricacies of conservation management practices. I spend week after week seeing what it takes to repair and preserve these ecosystems. A whole new depth of love for our planet comes from doing this often difficult yet necessary work. My goal is to continue to learn in every experience and soon put what I know to action in saving our planet. I will either spend my future years working directly in the field or I will be pushing legislation to protect and preserve our wild places.

Spring Creek Sanctuary

A few years back, Donna and Larry Rush, contacted NICHES about their desire to include their land in White County in their estate plan. We visited the property at that time, made a report and brought the property to the attention of the Acquisition Committee, who supported the lands protection. Earlier this year, during a annual contact between NICHES staff and individuals that are in known estate plans, Donna and Larry indicated they would like to donate their land this year, as a Life Estate.



One of Spring Creek Sanctuaries 'springs'

Their land, which will be called Spring Creek Sanctuary, is a mixture of mature woods, restored farmland, and an acre of open water pond. The land has some scattered bush honeysuckle, phragmites, and other invasives species. The woods boast large white oaks and scattered black cherries, a seep fed stream on the land has provided Donna and Larry with prime wildlife viewing for years.

Donna and Larry recognized that for the land to be healthy and to have the spring flora and prairie restoration flourish as they desire, it would need more work than they were able to provide. With their intent being to donate the land eventually, they decided it would be more meaningful to engage NICHES now and witness the benefits of the land being managed.

The land will be placed in a Life Estate, with NICHES added to the deed to simplify the transfer of the land at a later date. Donna and Larry will retain full use and control of the land during their lifetime, and so for the time being the land will not be open for public use.

The prairie restoration portion of the property is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) which provides an annual income for Donna and Larry. They have pledged a portion of the CRP income to NICHES management of the land over the next few years.



Nancy and Sam Litzenberger Estate

NICHES lost one of our own with the passing of Nancy Litzenberger on March 31st of this year. Nancy served on NICHES board of directors from 2013 to 2016 and was always gracious with her time and provided great council and insight before, during and after her service on the board. Nancy and her husband Sam lived and worked as attorneys in Warren County for many years. She lived an impactful and grounded life, connected to the earth through her love of nature and gardening.

In addition to all the above, Nancy owned a beautiful forty-acre woods adjacent to the lands donated by Gladys and Al Wright, known as Wright Rock Creek. Like the high-quality portions of Wright Rock Creek, Nancy's land features bedrock exposures, intermittent waterways, and uplands, with shooting stars, fire pinks, rattlesnake plantains under a healthy native overstory with little invasive species presence.

Upon Nancy's passing her 40 acre woods was transferred to NICHES for permanent protection. Her estate also included \$25,000 for NICHES to be used as needed. NICHES Board of Directors has directed Nancy's cash gift towards our stewardship endowment, to meet the needs of her donated land in perpetuity.

NICHES Land Trust is incredibly grateful for Nancy's service to the organization, her inclusion of biologically diverse land, and financial gift to cover the stewardship endowment for the Sam and Nancy Litzenberger Annex to the Al and Gladys Wright Nature Preserve. The addition of land to Wright Rock Creek will create 120 acres of connected high quality woodland habitat.

As NICHES has learned over the last few years, estate plans can take a while to close. NICHES will announce on social media and our website when the property is owned by NICHES and open to the public to explore and enjoy.



Photo of the Litzenberger Estate by: Chad Phelps



Clear waters flowing through a channel of Mansfield sandstone on the Litzenberger Estate.

Photograph by: Chad Phelps.



Flight of the Monarchs

A little over two decades ago Linda Anderson, former NICHES board president from 2017 to 2019, and her husband Hamer moved to a rural property in Tippecanoe County. Earlier in their marriage the couple had lived in Puerto Rico while Hamer was employed through the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez. Their new property included an 8 acre pasture that was previously used for grazing horses. With no interest between either of them in mowing or tending livestock, they decided to investigate what it would take to restore that section of their property to a natural tallgrass prairie. Over the years they worked to transform the monoculture of Kentucky bluegrass into a thriving ecosystem that supported a wide variety of native plant and animal species. Among the wildlife that drew frequent use from the restored habitat were migrating monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*). Over the next 20 years, as Linda continued to deepen her engagement with local conservation organizations like NICHES, nationwide populations of monarchs were in active decline. Aware of the threat to her orange and black blazoned visitors, she began collecting and rearing the eggs and larvae she could find in her prairie restoration. By removing predation and environmental hazard risks, she was able to increase the larvae's likelihood of survival up to 90%.

Recently, during a return trip to their former home in Puerto Rico, Linda reconnected with her old friend Rosie Micus whose husband had worked with Hamer at the University. To each of their surprise they discovered that they were both actively engaged in rearing and releasing monarchs. Rosie's love for the insect grew out of a trip she and her grandson Lucas took in 2011 to the Butterfly Garden at the Mayaguez Zoo. She learned the art of raising and releasing monarchs through a friend and was gifted three caterpillars, some food, a net, and a cutting of milkweed to get started. Unlike the butterflies that Linda was rearing in Indiana the Monarchs in Puerto Rico are a non-migratory subspecies that feed primarily on red milkweed and giant milkweed which have been largely cut down over the past 20 years.

Photos of Rosie's Monarch rearing and release operation in Mayaguez



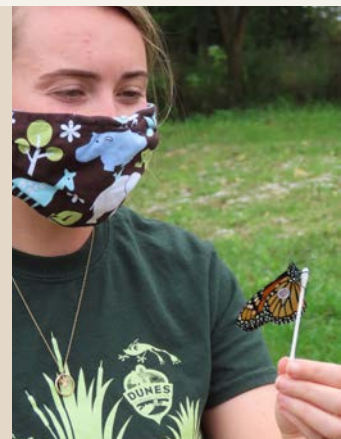


Rosie's grandchildren helping out on the long awaited "release day"

Linda joined Rosie on some "hunting" trips to find larvae on milkweed plants, she noticed that many of the remaining plants around the neighborhood only existed in fencerows or areas that were hard to mow. Previously, Rosie had collected small plants, and seeds so she could begin growing her own milkweeds at home. She raises the larvae on her back porch, releasing dozens at a time. When friends come to visit, they see the larvae and get the whole natural history story about the monarchs. Many guests leave with starter plants and pupae to begin their own projects at home. The shared conservation passion of the two women have gone on to pique the interests of their friends who in turn engage other friends.

The contagious excitement drawn collectively from making a positive ecological impact has been the fuel behind the growth of our NICHES community for the past 25 years. Raising our gaze to other conservation efforts big and small happening near and far remind us that we aren't alone in the fight. In early 2021 NICHES utilized funds through the NRCS's Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Project to restore 19-acres of our Williams Woods Property in Warren County. The Warren County Community Foundation supported the project by helping cover the cost of hand collecting seed to supplement the mix and the cost of broadcasting the seed. This island of native plants will soon join Linda's prairie and Rosie's tropical garden along with countless other private and public refuges set aside from development all over the globe. No single conservation effort can reclaim the large scale habitat matrix necessary for the survival of these migratory pollinator species, but enough like minds igniting passions in enough places can begin to put the puzzle pieces back together.

Join us on **September 12th** at our Granville Sand Barrens property for a hike and presentation on the migration and life cycle of monarch butterflies. Event attendees will also take part in a citizen science project to tag these butterflies and help provide biologists with more insight on their migration patterns. The purpose of tagging monarchs is to associate the location of the original capture with the point of recovery for each butterfly. To register for this event please email sam@nicheslandtrust.org (**session one:** 12 - 1:30 pm, **session two:** 2 - 3:30 pm).



The Indiana Plant Conservation Alliance

99% of Indiana prairies have been lost, primarily to the agricultural production of corn and soybeans. Forests have fared far better in the state but have seen large amounts of loss as well. The loss of habitat has been compounded by the threat of invasive species, such as honeysuckle, autumn olive, reed canary grass and multiflora rose, to name a few that are increasing on the land, due in part to the loss of fire, change in hydrology and climate change.

All of the natural spaces left are too small for large predators to perform their top down interaction. Deer need not look over their shoulder while munching on species they prefer, and species that they don't eat flourish. It's a LOT for native plants and animals to deal with and is the main reason for the formation of NICHES and other conservation organizations in the Midwest. Indiana has a variety of different conservation organizations but has not had an organization focused solely on protecting the rarest plants in the state.

In 2020, a collection of people representing a variety of organizations formed the Indiana Plant Conservation Alliance (INPCA) to begin to address the over 600 species of threatened, endangered and extirpated species in the state of Indiana. INPCA is modeled after successful Plant Conservation Alliance coalitions in other states. INPCA broke the state into 7 regions and selected a focal species for each of the regions. Two of the regions overlap with NICHES 13- county service area, and the two plants selected were species that NICHES was already engaged with.



Veratrum virginicum, or bunchflower, is a member of the lily family that stands 3.5' tall and when blooming has an open panicle with one-inch light, creamy flowers with a hint of green. Flies visit the flowers and are presumed to be the pollinators. The plant prefers its feet a little wet and is found in seeps and wetlands. It did not appear to be common, historically being mapped to 5 widespread northern counties in IN by Charles Deam. Today, there are 2 natural locations for the species, one by Muncie and one in White County, and neither is on protected lands at this time.

(Left) *Veratrum virginicum* in full bloom.

Photograph by: Tom Potterfeild

Check out the cover painting of this Sprout Issue!

Cirsium hillii, Hill's thistle, is a member of the composite family and is the shortest of the native thistles by far, standing only 2' tall. The bloom of the thistle makes up for its small stature and is the largest of the native thistles, measuring up to 3" across! Like all thistles, Hill's thistle produces abundant nectar and is an important food source when present for bees and butterflies. Historically, Hill's thistle occurred along the Lake Michigan dune region, Kankakee Sands, Wea Plain, Valparaiso Moraine and the Pigeon River area of northeast Indiana, but is now known from just 5 sites.

Each INPCA selected species has a working group that is collaborating to form a restoration plan for the species in the state of Indiana. For *Veratrum*, since the species was not widespread, the goal is simply to get 6 populations on protected sites in the state, 3 in the west and 3 in the east over the next few years. For *Cirsium*, which had a broader distribution, the goal is 21 populations to hopefully move the species to be delisted as endangered in the state. A number of years back, NICHES established *Veratrum* at Holley Savanna and Fisher Oak Savanna with plugs from the White County population, and in 2021 the plants produced 20 blooms. Two down and one to go in the west!

Last year, NICHES along with The Nature Conservancy and the DNR worked with Wabash Township in Tippecanoe County to manage Sand Ridge Cemetery and allow the largest population of Hill's thistle to bloom and set seed (the plants were previously being mowed in the cemetery). The plants bloomed well and 100 seeds were planted at Granville Sand Barrens and 3 oz. of seed traveled north and were turned into 510 unique genetic individuals at The Nature Conservancy greenhouse at Kankakee Sands. The work for both species will take years to achieve, and the goal is to continue to add species every year to steadily work towards a conservation solution for all 600 plant species of concern in the state.

To learn more about the work of INPCA and NICHES work with *Veratrum virginicum* and *Cirsium hillii* go to the blog on NICHES website.



Cirsium hillii bloom at Sand Ridge Cemetery
Photograph by: Chad Phelps.

2021 War of the Weeds

After 5 weeks of battling it out in the woodland arena, the dust has settled from this year's War of the Weeds. Volunteers stepped up from all corners of our service range to fill an astounding 313 volunteer shifts pulling the invading onslaught of garlic mustard. That's over 900 hours of management for our top priority springtime invasive! We were excited to leave multiple preserves virtually garlic mustard-free this year (a few pesky missed plants remain to tell tales of warning to their noxious comrades). As volunteers tirelessly removed truckload after truckload of the weed, their morale was rallied by the native plants and animals that surrounded them. Snakes, salamanders, orchids, turtles, rare moths, baby squirrels, and the patriotic bald eagle all paid visits to our heroes between skirmishes. A vibrant understory of freshly liberated spring ephemeral wildflowers cheered them on throughout the fray. Miraculously, the only allied losses were 2 water bottles, a pair of sunglasses, and a few unlucky misidentified native plants. NICHES wants to extend a MASSIVE thank you to everyone who joined us for this year's War of the Weeds and a special thanks to Volunteer Deborah Kull who came out for 10 shifts!



NICHES Volunteers during the 2021 War of the Weeds

Development

Thanks to support from Arrow Head Country RC&D, NICHES is creating digital interpretation for our Jasper and Newton County properties. This information will be accessible via an app, stay tuned!



We are honored to be included in this year's "Share the Love" event through Bob Rohrman Subaru. The event raised \$8,764.22 to help our organization further its conservation mission.



Thank You to our Additional Sponsors!



Driggs & Associates



For more information on sponsorships, contact our Deputy Director, Julie Rubsam at jrubsam@nicheslandtrust.org or call 765-423-1605.



In late October NICHES will be hosting our second annual Jack-o-Lantern Hike at Clegg Memorial Garden. Bring your flashlights and join us after dark for a non-scary stroll through our headquarters property. Attendees will get to peruse over a mile of locally carved squash art and place their vote for the greatest gourd. Limited hiking spots will be open for public registration between 7 - 10pm on Friday October 29th and Saturday October 30th.

Halloween night will include food, music, and festivities and will only be open to NICHES members and volunteers as a thank you for helping us get through another productive growing season! Stay tuned in our E-newsletter for more details on how to register and donate your own Jack-o-Lantern.



www.nicheslandtrust.org

niches@nicheslandtrust.org

765-423-1605

1782 N 400 E, Lafayette IN 47905

