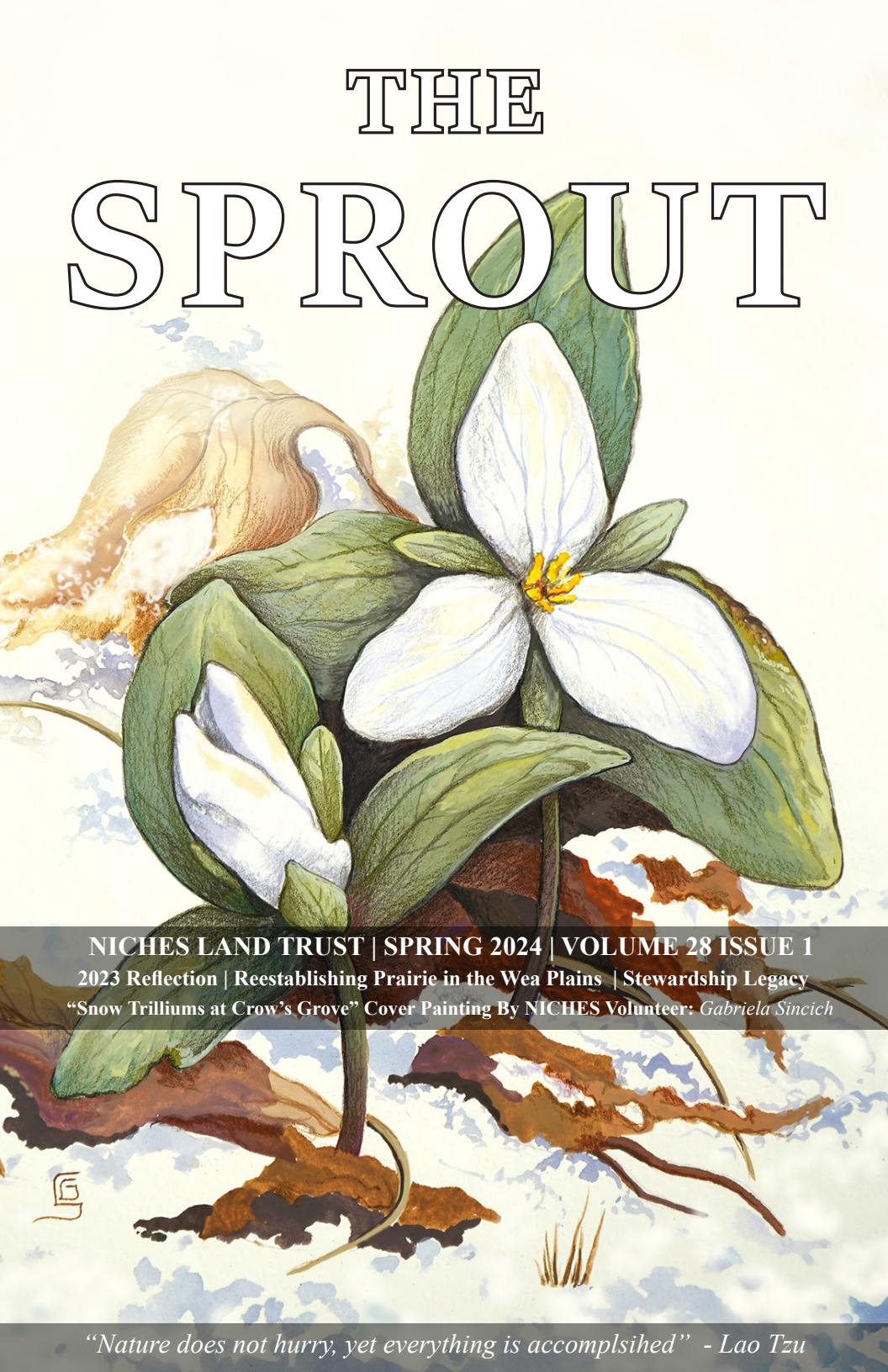


THE SPROUT



NICHES LAND TRUST | SPRING 2024 | VOLUME 28 ISSUE 1

2023 Reflection | Reestablishing Prairie in the Wea Plains | Stewardship Legacy

“Snow Trilliums at Crow’s Grove” Cover Painting By NICHES Volunteer: *Gabriela Sincich*

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished” - Lao Tzu

Executive Director Update

On January 27, 2024, the NICHES board hosted their annual retreat at our headquarters, Clegg Memorial Gardens. All 12 board members participated. Bob, Justin, Ann, and I attended from the staff. Purdue groundwater experts presented important topics and updates related to the LEAP water withdrawal project proposed along the Wabash adjacent to NICHES protected land. We had a group knowledge sharing and question-and-answer session. This dedicated session helped everyone reach a similar understanding of this large, ever-changing topic and provided some clarity on muddy issues. Afterwards, board member Vanessa Pacheco facilitated conversation to root us in connection to one another and the land.

NICHES remains concerned about a large water withdrawal from the Wabash River, particularly during low flow periods. The retreat highlighted that NICHES has been doing critically important work for nearly 3 decades by protecting the wetlands along the Wabash River. NICHES owns and protects over 350 acres of Wabash River Floodplain in Tippecanoe County and nearly 600 acres in Warren and Fountain counties.

NICHES has expanded our reach further by encouraging countless neighbors to enroll in the Wetland Reserve Easement program through the USDA. Wetlands protected by NICHES and our conservation neighbors are critical in recharging both groundwater and surface water. Wetlands filter pollutants, improve water quality, store carbon, provide food and medicine, and thus improve human health. NICHES remains steadfast in our goal to conserve the floodplains of our beloved waterways and to steward the habitats under our protection to the highest possible level.

This edition of The Sprout highlights how 2023 was an incredible year for the Land Trust. The commitment and dedication of the NICHES staff and board of directors was clearly demonstrated at the board retreat and set the stage for a remarkable 2024. It inspires great confidence for the future of this incredible organization. Please save the date for our annual meeting on June 22, 2024 so we can celebrate these successes in land conservation together.

-NICHES Executive Director, Shannon Stanis
shannon@nicheslandtrust.org

Mark Your Calendars

Save the dates and join NICHES staff, friends, and volunteers at our upcoming stewardship, outreach, and organizational events!

APRIL

War of the Weeds

**Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday
between April 19th and May 19th
(Shift 1: 10 am - 1 pm, Shift 2: 1 pm - 4 pm)**

Volunteer shifts to pull garlic mustard, an invasive species, across NICHES preserves. Great activity for all ages. Volunteer for 2+ shifts to receive this year's T-shirt for free. See NICHES website calendar for more details

Earth Day Poetry Hike

**April 21st- Hike @ Berkshire Tarnowski
Forest Preserve
(1 pm - 3 pm)**

Celebrate Earth Day with a hike along Deer Creek. Attendees are welcome to bring poems to share.

Wednesdays in the Wild*

**April 17th- Hike @ Fall Creek Gorge
(1 pm - 3 pm)**

Check out our new trails and learn about the conservation history of this iconic local preserve from NICHES Stewardship Director, Bob Easter.

**April 24th- Hike @ Moyer Gould Woods
(1 pm - 3 pm)**

Join Dan Childs for a springtime wildflower identification hike.

**May 29th - Hike @ NICHES Laura Hare Bend
of the Wabash East Preserve
(1 pm - 3pm)**

Learn about NICHES largest ever acquisition of Wabash River frontage in Tippecanoe County and our plans to restore prairie habitat there.

** Please register here: 765-567-2993 or
mcutler@tippecanoe.in.gov*

MAY

Native Plant Fest

May 18th @ Ross Camp (9:00 am - 3:00 pm)

Join the Tippecanoe Soil and Water Conservation District for this free event featuring a plant sale, hikes, presentations, prizes and more! For more information visit www.tippecanoe-county-wcd.org

NICHES Volunteer Day

**May 21st @ Clegg Memorial Garden
(10:00 am - 1:00 pm)**

Join us for a volunteer day to help plant native plants at Clegg Memorial Garden. See NICHES website calendar for more details.

JUNE

NICHES Annual Meeting

**June 22nd @ Wright Forestry Center,
West Lafayette 1:30 pm**

Join us for our Annual Membership Meeting and Birthday Celebration! We will vote on new board members, present 2023 financials, and share organizational updates.

NICHES Adventure Camp

Week 1: June 3 – 7,

Week 2: June 10 – 14

Week 3: June 17 – 21 (SOLD OUT!)

JULY

Wabash Riverfest

**June 13th: Tapawingo Park
(9:00 am - 4:00 pm)**

Free to the public and great for all ages. Join NICHES and our local conservation partners for float trips, art classes, fishing lessons, canoe races, and much more!

Looking Back at 2023

A month to month recap of stewardship, volunteering, and outreach highlights.

January: On January 16th, NICHES celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day with a day of service at Parker's Hickory Grove Farm in West Lafayette. Attendees braved the cold, soggy weather to help build a trail extension and stack brush from last year's thinning work. On January 28th, NICHES Hunting Crew Volunteers gathered at Martell Forest for an annual organizational update and potluck.



February: On February 18th and 19th, NICHES Hunting Crew Volunteers gathered at our Shawnee Bottoms and Vacendak Nature Preserves to help stack honeysuckle and prepare fire breaks ahead of our upcoming burn season. At Fall Creek Gorge, volunteers helped clear dead ash trees from a future visitor parking lot site.

March: With the help of volunteers and local conservation partners, NICHES conducted 14 controlled burns between November 3rd, 2022, and March 30th of 2023. In total, NICHES has conducted 126 prescribed fires between the spring of 2014 and the spring of 2023, covering a combined 4,322 acres! Important goals of these fires included increasing density of native herbaceous species, top killing undesirable woody growth, creating opportunities for overseeding, and providing ideal conditions for follow-up treatment of non-native, cool-season grasses.



April: NICHES and Camp Tecumseh celebrated the successful completion of a 2-month volunteer service project with our Aspen 1 AmeriCorps NCCC team! Over the course of their 4-week project period, this 8-person team assisted with a wide variety of stewardship tasks, collectively contributing over 1,200+ volunteer hours, and making an incredible effort towards improving the health of our local ecosystems.



May: Between April 14th and May 21st, volunteers came out to fill 383 individual garlic mustard pulling shifts. This is the fourth consecutive year of growth for the program and the second year in a row that has brought in over 1,000 volunteer hours. This incredible level of sustained volunteer support is becoming increasingly visible on the preserves. Properties that used to require multiple days of pulling now can be covered in a single day!

June: Between June 12th and June 30th, NICHES hosted 3 weeks of Summer Adventure Camp for local children aged 11-14. We are excited to announce that this year's program engaged 35 children—more than any other year in NICHES history! Camp activities included floating local waterways, touring Wolf Park, dissecting owl pellets, hiking, tree identification, electrofishing, glass bead making, and animal track casting.



July: On July 8th, NICHES participated in Greater Lafayette's annual Wabash Riverfest Celebration. We helped get over 100 people onto the water in rafts, canoes, and kayaks.

On July 15th, NICHES hosted an outreach event for members of the Mandela Washington Fellowship. This Fellowship is the flagship program of the U.S Government's Young African Leaders Initiative.

On July 18th and August 1st, NICHES hosted two 40-person volunteer groups of Campers in Leadership Training from Camp Tecumseh. The teams pulled Queen Anne's lace at NICHES Spring Creek Sanctuary Preserve and left our Frogs' Glory Preserve nearly mullein free!



August: On August 12th, NICHES partnered with Purdue's Wildlife / Aquatic Science Program to host a members-only Hellbender Event. The event included a documentary screening and a tour of Purdue's Hellbender Rearing Facility.

Over the summer, seasonal stewards Christi-Anna Hicks and Isaiah Robyne contributed over 900 hours to the preserves during an important growing season stewardship window.



September: On September 9th, NICHES hosted its annual Black Rock Society Dinner at the Wright Center in West Lafayette. Members of our Black Rock Society have donated land, included NICHES in their estate plan, or given a sizeable gift annually or over their lifetime. The dinner highlighted NICHES' efforts to conserve the endangered Hill's Thistle and create wildlife corridors through protection of the Wabash River Floodplain.

Between September 26th and 28th, NICHES partnered with the Indiana Land protection Alliance (ILPA) to host the Indiana Stewardship Gathering. Participants from 15 different conservation organizations gathered along Big Pine Creek in Warren County to share land management knowledge and techniques through a series of lectures, hikes and workshops.



October: On October 20th and 21st, NICHES hosted its 4th annual Jack-o-Lantern Hike at Clegg Memorial Garden. This year we lined the trail with 264 pumpkins, raised \$3k, and welcomed over 600 registered hikers through our gates!



November: On November 4th, volunteers gathered in Montgomery County for our annual cleanup of Sugar Creek. Cleanup efforts were focused between NICHES Bachner Preserve and the Jim Davis Bridge. This was our 4th and final creek cleanup of the year!

December: On December 1st, the largest deer cull in our organization's history concluded. In total, 146 deer were harvested by a team of 175 hunters. In addition to the cull, hunters collectively contributed over 1,750 volunteer stewardship hours in 2023!



Reestablishing Prairie in the Wea Plains

In September of 2022 NICHES added a new 200+ acre preserve in Tippecanoe County, known as the Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East. This preserve connects our Granville Sand Barrens and Roy Whistler Wildlife Area to the Wabash River on the opposite bank of the Ross Hills/Ross Reserve. NICHES worked with the previous owner to have them enroll in the USDA Wetland Reserve Easement program (WRE) to permanently retire the 140 acres of previously farmed floodplain. NICHES was then able to purchase the property with major support from Laura Hare Charitable Trust, the Roy Whistler Foundation, the McAllister Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette.

This property is part of the Wea Plains, where there once existed an 8,000-acre prairie. Original federal land survey records reveal that the entirety of the Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East acres, excepting about 180 feet of riparian woodland, had been under prairie vegetation in the early 1820s. This convinced the USDA to dedicate restoration funding to establishing prairie vegetation over 140 acres. NICHES worked with USDA biologists to plan out seed mixes for roughly 32 acres of sand prairie and 108 acres of tallgrass floodplain prairie and formulate a plan to prepare the site for this restoration.

The previous owner chose not to farm the acres in 2022, leaving the fields fallow for the summer. At first this raised concerns about weed pressure and about how to best prepare the site for seeding. Some typical species that show up early in restoration projects were present, including maretail, common ragweed, and giant ragweed. These species, considered agricultural weeds, are native annual species. Other species that established in the fields included non-natives like sweet Annie, reed canary grass, Japanese hops, poison-hemlock and curly dock; these can all cause big problems if left unchecked. Also in the mix was an impressive array of native river scour species filling their natural niche and buzzing with wildlife, including loads of native *Polygonum* and *Bidens* species. What was happening was natural succession, and if we could keep the aggressive non-native species from becoming too abundant and promote the continued development of the naturally occurring early successional native species, we could likely set up much better nutrient conditions and development of the soil microbial communities to support the successful establishment of the prairie seed mix.



Aerial view of NICHES Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East Preserve in 2022.

Captured by: Ben Massie



With the plan in place, work began on the ground with forestry mulching thick stands of honeysuckle in late January of 2023. NICHES staff cut by hand any stems that were too close to trees to mow and treated invasive white mulberry and Osage-orange across the property.

We returned to continue site preparation starting with Ecologic spraying reed canary grass around the restoration area the first week of May. When Ecologic finished what they could within the budget for site prep spraying, Bob directed Justin and Zach to pick up where they left off to finish the first round of treatment across the large project area. NICHES staff kept a close eye on things and returned to follow up on all problem species as necessary.

On August 1st Ecologic began mowing the 140-acre restoration area. As the contracted mowing was completed, Bob was on-site to monitor progress and take the opportunity to complete follow-up work on basal bark treatment of white mulberry around the restoration areas' perimeter

Following the initial mowing, Bob continued to monitor the site for needed follow-up work, and he coordinated with staff to get supplemental mowing and spraying completed.

Chad Evans reached out with locally-sourced oak trees (white, swamp white, bur, Chinquapin, black) which he had grown from seed. Brian Beheler brought Purdue's tree planter and tractor over from Martell to help plant the oaks on the south facing tree lines where white mulberry had been killed. This was completed as planned on October 27th.

On December 6th, Bob met with Shannon and board member Vanessa Pacheco to oversee the restoration areas with several species Bob had produced seed for at home. We also had a bag of seed which Chad Evans collected from the local prairie remnants. Over the summer, Justin and Zach both put effort into collecting seed in local sandy areas and overseeded several species in the best areas for their individual requirements.

Aquisition

NICHES purchases Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East with support from Laura Hare Charitable Trust, the Roy Whistler Foundation, the McAllister Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Greater Lafayette.

September 2022



Spraying

Site preparation continues with spraying of reed canary grass by Ecologic and NICHES Stewards. Spot treatments continue throughout the year.

May 2023



Work begins on the ground with forestry mulching of thick honeysuckle stands by Ecologic. Follow up volunteer mulching by Arbor America is completed in secondary target areas.

January 2023

Mulching



On January 15th, Bob met with Brant and Bry from Ecologic to go over a few final tweaks on the project and they started drilling our seed into the frozen ground. The work continued through the week and with good drilling conditions continuing through the weekend. Ecologic's Director of Restoration Matt Fox himself came to continue working on seeding to try to get as much completed as possible before the forecasted warm up and associated rain.

We will now wait until spring to install some live plugs, provided by Steph Frische of Native Interest Seeds, to finish off the inputs to the restoration. Plugged species will include wild strawberry, hairy petunia, goat's rue, and shooting star. These are all excellent species to include; they are limited in commercial availability, difficult to collect/ grow, and hard to establish from seed.

As this restoration develops, we will continue with follow-up work on all the problem species which we have been

managing at the site to ensure that they do not get any significant footholds. This will be critical in ensuring that our drilled prairie species have a fighting chance to establish themselves.

NICHES' thoughtful and detailed approach to our projects keeps us learning about the best ways to go about our work and how we can improve the path to naturalization of our plantings and return more of our local landscape to natural areas with stable ecological trajectories. Our dedicated staff's engagement with our partners, including government agencies, private contractors, and volunteers, is the key to NICHES' success in completing meaningful restoration work. Our first year at Laura Hare Bend of the Wabash East has gone just about as well as we could hope. This area has a bright future as a natural area and will likely be a local destination for passive outdoor recreation and reflection on nature for the public.



Planting

Chad Evans, local meteorologist and NICHES volunteer, provides locally sourced oak trees to be planted in the south facing tree lines of the restoration area. Purdue FNR Properties Manager, Brian Beheler, assists with a tree planter.

October 2023



After seasonal federal mowing restrictions for nesting birds are lifted Ecologic returns to mow the entire 140-acre restoration area with a rented batwing mower.

August 2023

Mowing



Ecologic technicians use a seed drill to disperse a carefully calculated mix of prairie seeds across the full 140-acre restoration area.

January 2024

Seeding

Hunting Program Update

In 2023, NICHES continued to see growth in our annual hunting program, with the total number of hunters, acres hunted, and deer harvested all reaching milestone marks. This is an achievement: in mitigating over-browsing of native plants; in reducing the spread of invasive species; and in ensuring that the deer population is healthy.

Outside of our fall hunting season, dedicated hunting volunteers contribute significantly to NICHES' stewardship goals. As part of the requirements in joining the program, each hunter must actively engage in various volunteer activities, with a goal of 20 hours each. Last year, NICHES' hunters helped the organization in maintaining trail systems, cleaning up farm dumps, removing invasive species, advocating for the organization, and a variety of other activities. All that work accounted for over 1,750 volunteer hours!

Here at the beginning of 2024, we took time to recognize all that work and share in our combined success at our 3rd



NICHES Hunter, Rod Williams, volunteering for the organization by giving a tour of Purdue's Hellbender Rearing Facility.

Annual Hunter Potluck. Over 14 different crews attended to share a delicious meal, discuss the impact of the past year, and look forward to how we can improve in the years to come.

Looking ahead, as NICHES continues to expand, these passionate and committed hunters are expected to play a pivotal role in realizing the organization's stewardship and public education goals, ensuring a sustainable and thriving local ecosystem.

***-NICHES Stewardship Manager,
Justin Harmeson
Justin@nicheslandtrust.org***



NICHES Hunters gather at the Wright Center for our 3rd Annual Potluck and organizational update.

2023 Volunteering Update

NICHES is excited to announce that in 2023 we reached a new milestone and received over 11,500 hours of volunteer service from individuals, hunting crews, businesses, and groups across our service range! This monumental community effort is equivalent to 5.5 additional full-time employees and empowers us to elevate our stewardship of the 4,500+ acres we protect to the highest level possible. Since NICHES inception in 1995 as a fully volunteer-led organization, the passion and sweat equity of our sustaining community has been an essential component in achieving our ambitious stewardship and outreach goals. From invasive species removal to trail maintenance, every hour volunteered translates into a tangible difference for native habitats and ensures the preservation of our natural landscapes for generations to come.

One individual whose efforts stand out among our dedicated volunteers is Gabriela Sincich, who we are humbled to name as 2023's Volunteer of the Year! In 2020 Gabriela approached NICHES about lending her artistic talents to the cover of our quarterly Sprout Newsletter. Since then, she

has created 12 stunning illustrations celebrating a variety of native flora and fauna subjects. In addition to the newsletter you are currently holding in your hands, you may recognize Gabby's art from our preserve signage, outreach content, and social media. As she explains: ***"I do it because I believe in the power of art to communicate ideas and information, to inspire people in unexpected ways, to make a positive impact in our communities, ultimately making our world better."*** In recognition of her contributions, Gabby will be honored at NICHES Land Trust's upcoming annual meeting in June. We hope you can join us in reflecting on the past year of volunteerism, celebrating this new milestone, and thanking all the incredible people that make our organization thrive.

Gabriela Sincich, NICHES
2023 Volunteer of the Year



Creating a Legacy of Stewardship

Last fall, NICHES Land Trust announced a generous bequest of land from our late friend Lois Lynne (Lowe) Farris. The Farris Estate, located near Monon, was given to our organization with the requirement that NICHES restore tillable acreage and remnant natural areas into a diverse landscape of dry prairie, savanna, wet prairie, and wetlands. Stewardship Director Bob Easter gave an overview of the restoration plan in our Fall 2023 edition of *The Sprout*.

This legacy gift of 400 acres is rooted in generosity. As the NICHES stewardship team removes invasive species and prepares for the land's first

prescribed burn, we are grateful to all the Hoosier families who have entrusted NICHES to preserve and protect their properties forever.

As you plan for your future, we encourage you to consider supporting the protection of native ecosystems through a gift in your will, charitable remainder trust, or even by listing NICHES as a beneficiary of your life insurance policy or retirement plan. By including NICHES in estate planning, you can join a circle of committed conservationists and landowners and provide opportunities for future generations to experience the wonders of the natural world.



Aerial view of NICHES Farris Estate Preserve in White County. This 400 acre preserve contains agricultural fields and large areas of formerly pastured sand prairie and sand savanna that still harbor remnant plant communities. This newly acquired property will be restored through a partnership between NICHES, NRCS, Ecologic and the USFWS through the Wetland Reserve Easement program.

A Community of Support

NICHES Land Trust would like to offer our sincerest gratitude to the families and friends who have paid tribute to their loved ones with a gift to our organization. We are thankful for the support of the many individuals who donated gifts in 2023 in memory of the following community members:

- Delano Arvin
- Daniel E. Bacone
- Peter Barker
- Bill Baugh
- Louis O. Carr
- Brad Grenard
- John Horn
- Col and Mrs. CJ Martin
- Eric Phelps
- James Peterson
- JoAnn Swintek
- Betty M. Suddarth
- Jim Tarnowski
- Ted Ulrich
- Rick Westerman
- Martha Lyerly

Thank You to our Sponsors!



*Isch Insurance Agency, The National Group, Aquarium World,
Phronesis inc., Edward Jones - Elliot Hartje*

For more information on sponsorships, contact our Development Director,
Ann Fields Monical at ann@nicheslandtrust.org or call 765-423-1605.

NICHES ADVENTURE CAMP 2024



Week 1: June 3-7

Week 2: June 10-14

Week 3: FULL!

Join us for a week out in nature exploring, hiking, paddling, cooking, creating, climbing, and more! Each week, 11 campers between 11-14 years old will get to discover and learn about native ecosystems by being fully immersed in them. For info about camp or financial assistance email: sam@nicheslandtrust.org.

Thank you
to our 2024
Summer
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Scan here to
register for camp!



www.nicheslandtrust.org

niches@nicheslandtrust.org

765-423-1605

1782 N 400 E, Lafayette IN 47905