

April- May 2020



Newsletter

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A Letter From the Board President

Dear Friends,

I hope my letter and this newsletter finds you well. This is a strange and unusual time for all of us. As we are sequestered in our homes many of you may find yourselves bored, uncertain, or perhaps, like me, enjoying life at a slower and quieter pace. This has given me more time to really appreciate the unfurling of spring that is all around us. While I thoroughly enjoy every season that we experience in Central Illinois, early spring always reminds me of a quote by Rachel Carson.

"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."

- Rachel Carson, Silent Spring

My friend, Angelo, shared with me this spring that the first sounds of spring come from the calls of the boreal chorus frogs. In early spring you can hear their calls, which sound like a thumbnail strumming on a fine-toothed comb, at south Merwin, Hayes, Chinquapin, and Sweeney Preserves. They are followed by the plains leopard frog that reminds me of the noise you can make when sucking the back of your hand, a chuck-chuck-chuck noise. On one excursion Angelo pointed out the call of the American woodcock. Woodcocks, another harbinger of spring, have elaborate courtship flights that are often seen right after dawn.



In my own yard the magnolia, Scillia, daffodils, and hyacinths are blooming. Even our horticulturally neglected turf is turning that happy vibrant green. I can see the redbuds have their purple buds just aching to unfold.

ParkLands has so many inspiring and charming inhabitants and while our own neighborhoods may not have the same diversity, spring comes to them as well. It is my wish for all of you that you can find comfort and joy in experiencing the beauty of spring because summer will soon be upon us.

Jessica Chambers
ParkLands Board President



January Social at Stave Wine Bar



The ParkLands Outreach committee started off 2020 with a casual social at Stave Wine Bar in Uptown Normal. 80 attendees were treated to the guitar music of Rubén Martín Blazquez as they mingled board and staff, enjoyed the company of friends interested in the outdoors, and learned more about the mission of ParkLands. A lucky handful even left with beautiful nature-inspired 50-50 raffle prizes. A great time was had by all!

Our winter socials have been a success. The casual atmosphere is an enjoyable way to connect friends of ParkLands and spread the word about we do. We added 12 new members from this event, and we truly believe that continued growth in membership is critical to expanding our impacts in the region.

Winter Hike: The Most Wander-full Time of the Year

Craig Lutes

A winter morning “is only as drab”, observes Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, “as he who walks in it without a glance skyward, ear cocked for geese.” Such was understood by a mix of 25 new and familiar faces attending the annual winter hike, this year held at Sweeney Woods Preserve just north of Lake Bloomington.

Eyes cocked skyward had hikers reaching for sunglasses as fading remnants of a crisp morning fog unveiled bluebird skies, while day-old snow illuminated a landscape crisscrossed by wildlife corridors best visible this time of year. As the group huddled around a particularly interesting stretch of hand-like impressions dotting the riverbank, biologist Angelo Capparella provided an impromptu lesson on muskrat, beaver, and otter behavior by highlighting prime examples of “slides” used to access the water and tell-tale bank impressions left when undercut burrows collapse.

As we continued, Land Steward Jason Shoemaker made a case for the resiliency of Mother Nature when given a chance. Having grown up in the area, Jason recalled seeing the waving tips of corn stalks calling for rescue from underneath flood waters prior to the ParkLands Foundation’s acquisition in 2009. Each time this tilled land flooded, the river pulled waves of topsoil back into its banks.

Today, the bottomland still floods most springs, often up to 10 feet high. But now, the deep roots of prairie grasses, silver maples, and sycamores hold the soil in place while a man-made levee corrals the current back into its banks. Jason pointed out stands of unassuming switchgrass whose dormant seeds, amazingly, sprouted to life after just a couple years of restoration efforts, carrying on genetics original to the site. These changes are no accident. They are the work of Shoemaker, an army of volunteers, and countless ParkLands partners.

The highlight of this preserve for most is the stately bur oak perched atop the hillside trail whose burly armor protected it from the frequent wildfires of years past and made its species an icon of prairie savannas. Today, its curled arms frame a perfect bird’s-eye view of the restored river bottom.

This ridge is a contemplative spot. I felt rushes of gratitude to be standing there, on land available to the public, surrounded by thriving wildlife and a clean river. I pictured who or what may have stood on that very ridge in pre-settlement times, scanning a similar scene that had been lost up to 10 years ago. I gave thanks for the willing hands and visionary minds that made it all possible, and felt energized to do my part in the work to come.



Sweeney Preserve's signature bur oak.

COVID-19 Updates

Like so many organizations around the world, the ParkLands Foundation is having to adapt to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff has been working from home, and we've had to make some difficult decisions for the health of our communities and of our preserves. As of the time of this newsletter:

- The Merwin Preserve is closed until April 30th. We will reevaluate at that time and communicate updates via our Facebook page and website.
- The May 3rd Wildflower Walk at Merwin Preserve has been **canceled**.
- The June 5th members-only Night Event at Letcher Basin Preserve has been **canceled**
- Volunteer work days have been postponed until further notice.

We will reevaluate future events in May, such as our annual bike ride (July 11) and Mussels & the Mackinaw event (Aug 8). Please keep these events on your calendar, and we will communicate updates on our Facebook page and website. Unfortunately, we had our busiest year of events planned to date, but we will be ready to gather whenever and however it is safe to do so!

New Staff

ParkLands is growing! We recently hired our third staff member, Craig Lutes, as part-time Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator. In this role, Craig is responsible for developing and implementing outreach programs, organizing volunteers efforts (work days and stewards), and communicating with the public (social media, newsletters website, public programs, etc.).

Craig brings a range of experiences in communication, data analysis, and marketing practices both in corporate and nonprofit settings. More importantly, though, Craig brings a genuine passion for conservation, history, and the people of central Illinois. He's been a member of ParkLands and grew up in Normal. Craig and his wife, Kelsey, reside in Bloomington with their two young children, Davis and Andi.

"ParkLands went from a nice place to enjoy bluebells to a mission I wanted to commit to after hearing Guy Fraker speak in 2017. I hope to support ParkLands' tremendous legacy of visionary leaders and tireless supporters, while finding new ways to bring this same epiphany moment to more people." - Craig Lutes



We are requesting your help!

ParkLands Foundation is in need of a Gator UTV! A generous donation has kickstarted the first half of this project, but we need your help to see it through! Contribute at www.parklandsfoundation.org/donate.

Utility vehicles are a valuable efficiency as one Land Steward and a small number of dedicated volunteer stewards together manage over 3,600 acres. They are a critical tool during the controlled burn of a prairie or savanna, especially on our larger properties, used both to monitor the fire and to carry water for fire suppression. In addition, with recent new properties and volunteer stewards being added in Woodford County, an additional gator will reduce travel time and logistical hurdles for our volunteers and Land Steward, enabling the most efficient use of time and stewardship resources.

Group restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have dampened our ability to burn this spring, which will only condense the management schedule in 2021.

Thank you for your continued support!

Why does the male house wren sing?

Rachael DiSciullo

On your walks along the bluff overlooking the Mackinaw River at the ParkLands Foundation's Merwin Nature Preserve, you may have noticed numbered nestboxes set on poles with a pizza pan below or seen a college-aged student using a portable radio to check in with another person out of sight. You've maybe wondered about which animal these boxes are for, and what the field gear-laden people are possibly doing—or perhaps you are familiar with the long-term study on northern house wrens that Merwin has hosted for the last 40 summers.

Dr. Charles F. Thompson began his work with the house wrens in the summer of 1980 and has been back with a team of graduate and undergraduate students every year since. Broadly, Dr. Thompson, along with his long-time collaborator Dr. Scott K. Sakaluk (both faculty in the School of Biological Sciences at Illinois State University), is interested in tracking breeding patterns, population changes, and differences in behavior of house wrens both within and across their summer breeding seasons. House wrens are secondary cavity nesters, which means that they prefer to build their nests inside existing holes in trees as they are unable to make the hole themselves. Because of this, the house wrens regularly use the pre-made "cavities" that our research group has made available to them—those nestboxes dotted throughout Merwin! In total, there are 700 nestboxes throughout the Merwin Nature Preserve. Every year during peak breeding season (around mid-June), approximately 30% of nestboxes are home to a breeding pair and their 6-8 nestlings. Around half of the house wrens that successfully fledged nestlings from their first nest early in the breeding season will then go on to build a second nest late in the breeding season to produce another set of 5-7 nestlings. This means that around 500 adult house wrens visit our central Illinois Merwin Nature Preserve oasis every summer to rear and fledge more than 2,000 baby house wrens—a magnificent feat.



A male house wren sings on a honey locust tree at the Merwin preserve.



An 11 day-old house wren with a newly assigned uniquely-numbered aluminum band.



Rachael DiSciullo recording song at the Merwin Preserve.

Though adult and baby birds may often be out of sight when you visit Merwin, the song of the male house wren is ever-present. Most agree that bird song is a beautiful and exciting feature of the forest, and many know that song is typically a trait that offers males a better chance of finding a female mate or that allows males to successfully defend a territory. In house wrens, we suspect that this is indeed true; however, we are as yet unsure which particular parts of the elaborate and complex song are most attractive to females or best deter male competitors. In my Ph.D. research, I aim to solve this puzzle. To do so, I have been working at Merwin since the summer of 2017 to record male song to compare different song types to the number of nestlings a male produced, and to present different song types to breeding males and females at Merwin to evaluate their behavior in response to songs that we expect will be attractive to females and will be a deterrent to males. To date, we have gathered nearly 1,000 15-minute recordings of males singing between 0 and 250 1-3 second songs, and we have identified how many nestlings the males featured in these song recordings have produced. While much of my Ph.D. work is now taking place on the computer, in the summer of 2021 I will be out among the birds again evaluating how they respond to different song types. With my research, I hope to answer the question "why does the male house wren sing?" with certainty.

In the meantime, it is certain you will see me and my fellow team members that include an always excellent crew of 4-6 undergraduate researchers, our two current M.S. students, a ten-year veteran Wren Crew member, and of course Drs. Thompson and Sakaluk among the trees, visiting nestboxes, and checking in with each other on the radio. We love Merwin just as you all do, and we'd love to tell you about our work. So, if you see us on your morning hikes in the preserve—just give us a shout!

If you'd like to learn more about Dr. Thompson's long-term research study on the northern house wrens that breed at the ParkLands Foundation's Merwin Nature Preserve, please visit his website at: biology.illinoisstate.edu/wrens

Painting ParkLands Signs

Best Volunteer Job Ever!

Peg Schickedanz

Upon retirement 3 years ago from 40 years in business management, my dream was to utilize my art and education degree, and to get outdoors for walks in the woods. As an artist, Merwin Nature Preserve provided endless ideas for paintings. ParkLands site hikes revealed to me that the signs were in need of some tender loving care. And the open kiosks beckoned for learning opportunities. So caring for the signs in the beautiful outdoors became my new volunteer passion.

Having kayaked many times past Wyatt's Ford, the Jim Fenis sign was my first paint job. Next was the Leman site at Sparks bridge. Preferring to do my sign painting early in the morning, and standing quietly painting for several hours, you can imagine what I saw and heard. About 15 minutes in, the surrounding critters didn't even notice me. An occasional bird would perch on the sign. At Leman a pack of coyotes went howling along the river totally unaware of me. At Fenis a deer came down to the river for a drink.

I was hooked. On I went to do Merwin South, West, North, then Breen, Moon, Ridgetop, Kenyon, John English, and various accompanying signs. The original repaint of all signs took 3 months. Being a record keeper, I snapped a photo of each sign and recorded the miles driven and hours spent. But the true joy came from relaxing and painting for hours with sounds of nature all around me, and a congratulatory hike afterwards!

I continue to keep an eye on all of the signs, touching up when needed, or repainting when damaged. Included is placing pertinent information in the kiosks to spur interest. It is my belief that well cared for signs are important to show that the community values these sites enough to share them with the public, provide maps, history, flora and fauna to look for, care of nature rules, and education about these pristine sites. I consider it an honor to care for these signs.

What are my favorite signs? The old Merwin north path entry sign which reads 'dedicated to the appreciation and study of nature, foot traffic only'. And the Franklin Kenyon Preserve sign. I knew Frank, we were neighbors and shared our love of quirkiness and dogs. And nearby the little 'park here' sign with the green leaf/yellow background logo. Come on, how many 'park here' signs have a hand painted leaf on them? NONE! And my favorite paintings? Anna Letcher Barn and Merwin Sentinels.



Clockwise, from top left: Merwin north gate old sign, Kenyon, 'Merwin Sentinels', 'Anna's Barn' at Letcher Basin (now gone).



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