

Spring Birding in the Mackinaw Watershed

By Dr. Matt Fraker

COVID is for the birds. No. Seriously. COVID is absolutely for the birds.

After a year of being confined, cooped-up, quarantined, masked, and living on Door Dash offerings, this year could be a great year to shake all of it off and go find some birds as our much-needed spring (thank you, unwanted polar vortex) finally may be arriving.

With that in mind, let's take some suggested birding strolls through the Mackinaw River watershed in spring.

March American Woodcock Displays Roaming Sweeney Woods just north of Lake Bloomington or driving up to the south entrance of Chinquapin Bluffs in Woodford County at dusk in March will provide access to American Woodcock and their bizarre crepuscular flight display and on the ground "peenting".

These birds have a very specific window for displaying which begins 15 to 25 minutes after sunset. Chinquapin Bluffs tends to be a little more open (for night-sky enjoyment) and very safe for evening strolling. Barred Owls are very common in both areas, and Great-horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls might also be vocalizing at these times.



Photo: Robert Hamilton/Alamy

April Woodpecker Bonanza Hiking the Merwin Preserve in early April allows one to attempt to run the "Woodpecker Cycle". Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are thick there during their April migration. Red-headed Woodpeckers have a strong resident population. Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers can be anywhere. Hairy Woodpeckers tend to like the brawnier older oak timbers. Northern Flickers are also present, and Pileated Woodpecker is very possible.



Those Magic Weeks in May GO ANYWHERE. BUT GO!!! From Late April into mid-May, true migration magic happens, usually peaking around May 8th - 12th. The newer Hayes Woods Preserve in Woodford County has great trails and stellar migratory habitat. The Merwin Preserve is also a no-brainer for this window.

Letcher Basin in Late Spring This phenomenal prairie restoration is a great place to visit in mid-to-late May when many of the grassland birds have arrived and remain visibly on territory. Parking up at Ridgetop Hill Prairie and walking the small road down to Letcher Basin can be a very nice stroll. Letcher does have a loop trail now, and the privately-owned but publicly-accessible Thornton easement offers a steep but nice drop down to actually get right to the Mackinaw River.

And if anyone has any questions or would like more information, please get in touch with us. We would love to do anything necessary to make you enjoy your time on these beautiful preserves.

Welcome back, Spring!!

New Year's Eve Hike

Our New Year's Day hike turned into a New Year's Eve hike when a severe ice storm rolled through on January 1st. All the better, though, as 20 guests soaked up the winter sun for a COVID-restricted romp through Lexington Preserve – one of our most accessible locations that seems to hide in plain sight. We explored the bottomland loop, located the unique chinquapin oak on the river bluff, and waded through the Dorothy Shelley Prairie Wildflower Garden. Visit these sites year-round with the new [trail guide](#) created for the event. Special thanks to Hike leader Jan Turner for sharing her plant ID skills.



Ski & Snowshoe

The hardest part of planning a cross-country ski and snowshoe event is, of course, snow. Luckily, 7-8 inches of accumulation hung around just long enough for 30 guests to enjoy the Mackinaw Valley dressed in a blanket of shimmering white on February 20th. Conditions were ideal at Chinquapin Bluffs as skiers drifted through the flat uplands while snowshoers traversed the slopes into the bottomland. Both groups recovered with chili, beverages from Keg Grove Brewing Company, and other snacks. [WildCountry](#) in Normal generously donated the cost of rentals, making the event an important fundraiser to start the year. Special thanks to several attendees who lent their expertise to assist first-timer skiers.

Spring Break of Stewardship

For most people, spring break brings to mind relaxation on a faraway beach. For students of Illinois State University's [Alternate Breaks](#) program, though, spring is a time for service. ParkLands hosted 25 Honors students for three days full of stewardship, laughs, and more than a few dance breaks. Their relentless enthusiasm was infectious and inspirational. The students made major progress on controlling invasive honeysuckle at our Moon and Hayes Woods preserves, while also removing old plastic tree protectors and other debris from Merwin and Mohr in preparation for 4,000+ trees being planted next month.



Making a Difference

As we look forward to spring and putting 2020 behind us I would like to look back at 2020 and say THANK YOU! As ParkLands has increased our impact in the community, through expanded land holdings, growing land stewardship obligations and an Outreach program with more public events, our financial needs have grown as well. We continue to focus on adding to our membership base and offering perks to those that join each year. We have also started fundraising in addition to memberships. We appreciate those that chose to donate additional funds last year. We raised over \$30,000 dollars from our two letter campaigns in July and November. These funds will go A LONG WAY towards stewarding our 3,600 acres on the Mackinaw River and keeping our properties safe and accessible to the general public. We pride ourselves on sharing public access to nature through private donations. Your donation is crucial to providing this service. We THANK YOU for helping ParkLands succeed for 54 years and we look to a bright future of many more decades of conservation in our own Mackinaw River watershed.

- Erin Herbez, Administrative Director

Upcoming Events

April

22-25

Earth Day Volunteer Challenge

Join us in celebrating Earth Day with our largest volunteer event ever!

With the community's help, we will

raise ecological awareness, jumpstart our spring stewardship projects, and help fund 2021 outreach programs. We are grateful for a strong response from area sponsors and volunteers already, though there are still spots available for team or individual signups:

<http://bit.ly/ParkLandsEarthDay>

May

1

Merwin Wildflower Walk

A spring favorite is back! Local

naturalists, including ISU

Distinguished Professor Emeritus,

botanist, ecologist, and ParkLands legend Roger Anderson, will lead guided tours of Merwin Preserve's vibrant spring wildflowers. Four sessions are available starting at 10:00am. Register at:

<http://bit.ly/ParkLandsWildflowerWalk>

June

26

Night Event - Members only

A family-friendly event for all ages.

Local biologists will share about the

nocturnal creatures that call Letcher

Basin home before leading expeditions to observe them. Guests will use echolocators to observe bats, light sheets to survey insects, and much more!



Earth Day

Volunteer Challenge

April 22-25 2021

Join us in celebrating Earth Day with our largest volunteer event ever!

Volunteer teams will compete across numerous ParkLands preserves to pull, lop, saw, and stack the most invasive brush, with the winners taking home ParkLands merchandise and/or a cash prize.

Challenge locations include:

- » Merwin
- » Letcher Basin
- » Chinquapin Bluffs
- » Hayes Woods
- » and many more!

Sign up as a team or individual volunteer:

<http://bit.ly/ParkLandsEarthDay>

Questions? Contact Craig Lutes at craig@parklandsfoundation.org or (309) 830-4066



All participants will receive a free ParkLands Earth Day bandanna!



2021 Workdays

Time and date may change. More workdays may be added.

Date	Location
April 22-25	Multiple preserves
May 22	Merwin
June 12	Weston
June 18	Chinquapin Bluffs
July 16	Merwin
July 17	Sweeney Woods
September 3	Chinquapin Bluffs
September 11	Chinquapin Bluffs
September 17	Letcher Basin
October 15	Merwin
November 7	Cayuga Ridge
November 13	Kenyon-Baller Woods

CALENDAR OF EVENTS 2021

January

New Year's Day Hike

Lexington Preserve
01/01 @ 1:00PM

February

Winter Hike/Cross-

country Ski
Kenyon-Baller Woods
02/13 @ 1:00PM

April

Earth Day Volunteer Challenge

All Preserves
04/22 - 04/25

May

Wildflower Walk

Merwin Preserve
05/01 @ 10:00AM

June

Night Event - Members Only

Letcher Basin
06/26 @ 6:30PM

July

Bike Ride

Lexington
07/10 @ 7:30AM

Tale of Two Prairies

Ridgetop and Letcher Basin
07/24 @ 8:00AM

August

River Adventure

Hayes Woods
08/07 @ 9:00AM

Night Under the Stars

Meteor Event
Letcher Basin
08/14 @ 7:30PM

September

Annual Meeting

Sweeney Woods
09/12 @ 10:30AM

October

Guest Speaker - Dr. Michael Wiant

Chinquapin South
10/16 @ 2:00PM

Newly added!



Erica Nallik

PLANT



MOHR TREES!

By Michael Brown, Ecology Action Center

The Ecology Action Center's Tree Corps is a brand-new tree planting initiative for Bloomington-Normal and McLean County which aims to significantly increase tree-planting in our community, eventually ramping up to 10,000 trees annually. Tree Corps is a key strategy of the EAC's still-in-development BN Clean Air Plan, which will set targets for local reduction of both greenhouse gas emissions and air quality pollutants like ozone and develop strategies to reach those targets.

This is the EAC's second such large scale tree planting initiative; the first was launched decades ago when the Ecology Action Center was known as Operation Recycle and included much of what is now Comlara Park. The current Tree Corps initiative launched in 2021 to coincide with the EAC's 50th anniversary of the founding of Operation Recycle in 1971 .

The "Mohr Trees!" project is a partnership with the ParkLands Foundation, the McLean County Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Living Lands and Waters. The Ecology Action Center pledged to help ParkLands plant 4,200 small trees at the Mohr Tract near Lexington in April 2021. With the help of Living Lands and Waters, the EAC now hopes to more than double that number to plant 10,000 trees in 2021.

The trees planted will all be native hardwood species including black oak, red oak, white oak, bur oak, pecan, and shagbark hickory. These trees are

cost-effective bare-roots seedlings. To meet the need for both donations and volunteer labor for planting, the EAC is challenging church congregations, community groups, workplace groups, families, and any other interested group of people to commit to support planting 100 trees through this project by forming a Tree Corps Team.

Each Team can get started by making their pledge towards 100 trees (or more!) at Tree-Corps.org under the "Mohr Trees" section. At \$5 per tree (which covers the cost of both a tree and related supplies and expenses) the minimum recommended group pledge is \$500, and lining up a few volunteers to help with planting (if possible, given that planting workdays will be weather dependent). To further increase the impact and leverage donations, Living Lands and Waters as part of their One Million Trees project will match every tree donation with another tree. These matching donations will be planted at nearby ParkLands parcels including the Merwin Preserve.

To create a new Tree Team, a group simply needs a name (which can be the name of the church congregation or workplace), an assigned individual to organize the group—the Team Captain, a pledge towards a specific number of trees, and a commitment to try to meet that pledge by April 10, 2021. Tree Teams can raise the money towards their pledge amount within their groups, through family or friends, or through other means.

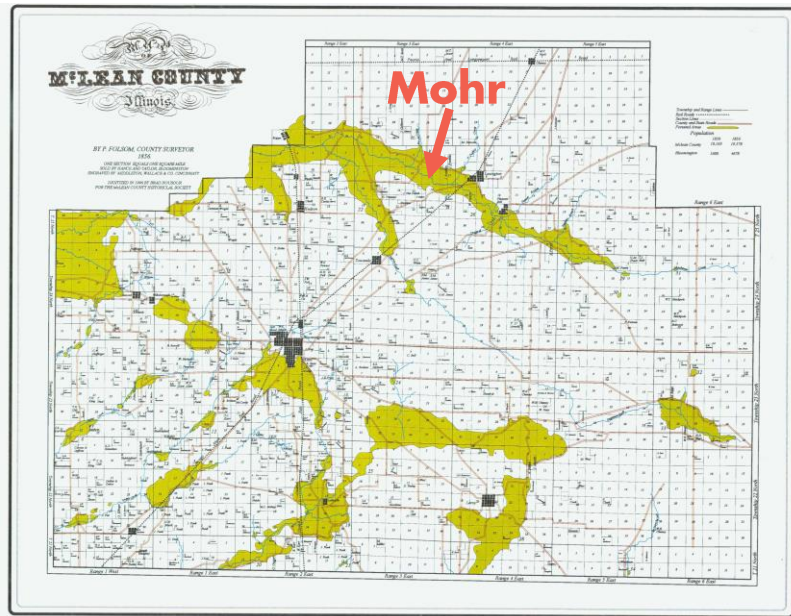


Mohr Preserve, the site of 4,200 bare-root seedling trees being planted on April 10th .

EAC staff will coordinate planting workdays in with Tree Team Leaders; the Mohr Tree planting is tentatively scheduled for the weekend of April 10, 2021 with possible prep work taking place before then on weekdays. Understanding that individuals have other commitments and limited flexibility, supplying volunteers for planting is desirable but not mandatory.

Planting workdays will adhere to all existing COVID-19 protocols to include at least face coverings and social distancing. In case of restrictions at the time of planting that entirely prohibit any such gathering, alternative plans will be prepared which may include planting by mechanical means to completely avoid person-to-person contact.

Learn more, donate, form a team, or volunteer at <https://Tree-Corps.org>, and click on the "Mohr Trees!" link on the right side of the page.



Even in prairie-rich McLean County, trees covered 10% of our pre-European settlement landscape. This map from 1856 shows the original groves of trees being reestablished. Map credit: McLean County Museum of History collections

Board Member Spotlight

Meet ParkLands board member, Corrie Heck Scott.

Years with ParkLands

I'm a total newbie! I started volunteering with ParkLands in September 2020, so about 6 months.

Why Volunteer?

For several years, I have been looking for opportunities to volunteer with a local environmental group - especially one that was focused on the nexus of healthy lands and healthy waters. I have been impressed with the ParkLands properties and respect the organization's focus on watershed health.

Favorite ParkLands "Spot"

Letcher Basin is definitely one of my favorites. I love the simultaneous feelings of open expanse and isolated protection. The timber lining the outside of the gorgeous restored prairie feels like home to me.



Profession

I work in global communications for The Nature Conservancy. My work often has me more focused on what is happening in rural India or Kenya, so I love that ParkLands offers me the opportunity to do something really meaningful, but close to home.

We are looking for new board members like Corrie! Those with fundraising, marketing, graphic design, legal and biological experience are needed!
If interested, contact Erin Herbez at erin@parklandsfoundation.org



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