



Blue Mounds Area Project (BMAP) staff ecologist Sam Anderson leads about 20 hikers on a rainy Saturday morning on August 1 to tour portions of the Vermont Church Legacy Prairie and Woodland, a 35-acre property restored to natural prairie, opened to public access and protected in perpetuity from development. *Photo by Kim Lamoreaux*

'Singing from the same hymnal'

By Kim Lamoreaux

A different kind of "choir" came together at the Vermont Lutheran Church six years ago. But this particular choir's repertoire consisted entirely of symbolic songs of praise to Mother Earth.

The Vermont Church Legacy Prairie and Woodland project near Black Earth is a testament to the land conservation efforts of long time church members like Peter Antonie and Greg Herrling who, since 2018, have

led the effort to preserve and protect 105 acres of prairie, woodland and wetland from any future development and guarantee public access to the land for generations to come. In addition, their conservation work has improved and protected the water quality of Vermont Creek, a direct tributary of the Black Earth Creek, a Class I trout stream.

At a presentation on Aug. 1, Antonie told a group of 20 people that the Legacy project's origin dates back to 2018 when the adjacent original farmstead and its 115 acres went on the market.

Continued on page 4

IN THIS ISSUE

**2 PRESIDENT'S COLUMN &
ECOLOGIST'S REPORT**

**5 SPEED DATING
GONE WILD**

**6 BMAP'S WINTER
CONVERSATIONS**

**9 STILTGRASS GROWTH
RAISES CONCERN**

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Greg Jones

I want to start by saying that I know everyone who wants to own a tract of land is not able to. My wife and I saved money for years with that as our dream. Finally in my 50s, we could afford it and found the perfect parcel for

blueberries, potatoes, onions, squash, tomatoes, corn, beans, raspberries and so much more. Much of that lasts us all year long. We also forage some food off the land.

The land also provides us with recreation. I built a ski trail on the property that can be skied in both directions. There are other trails as well and we ski and snowshoe them. We take long strolls around the property on the trails after dinner.

The land helps feed our spirits. All four of our parent's ashes are spread under special trees here. It

us. I consider myself lucky, (along with hard work), to be able to own our property.

Some 25 years later, I want to talk about all that the land has given me. First and foremost, we had a parcel of land on which we could build the house we always wanted. The land gave us a place to live. Before the house was finished, we had a well drilled. After hitting the aquifer, the land gave us delicious pure clean cold water.

It was several years before we built the house. In the meantime, I was able to gather wood for our wood burning stove where we were living at the time. The land still regenerates more wood than we need to continue supplementing our heat with the wood stove all these years.

The land helps to feed us. We have a large garden every year and we produce many crops. We grow



Linda Millunzi-Jones and Greg Jones gardening on their property near Barneveld.

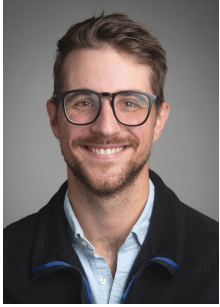
gives them a presence in our lives even after they are gone. We see firsthand and up close the changing of the seasons, the beautiful sunsets and the ever-evolving prairie we planted, all of which fills us with awe and inspires us in many ways. There is also a great deal of satisfaction in watching the prairie mature. We are able to discover some of the wonders of nature with our grandchildren

out here.

I don't know if any of us get to achieve full contentment in life, but living on the land has gotten me a lot closer to that end than any other place I could have lived. In the end, the land has given me so much and I am so grateful to have gotten to a place physically, mentally and spiritually where I can say that. So, I say thank you to the land and all that you have given me.



ECOLOGIST'S REPORT



Sam Anderson

I hope you are enjoying a safe and happy growing season! While spring 2026 was fairly typical in terms of weather, our summer has been notable for high temperatures, smoke from northerly wildfires, short bursts of heavy rain, and long stretches without much precipitation. Groups like the Wisconsin Initiative for

Climate Change Impacts have long predicted these changes to Wisconsin's climate, but these conditions can still be surprising and concerning.

While extreme heat and moderate drought may turn our lawn brown and wilt our gardens, restored and remnant grasslands and woodlands in southern Wisconsin continue to blossom and grow. Many of our native species are well adapted to drought, with many dry prairie plants actually thriving in hot, dry conditions. Even native plants that are less drought-tolerant still show resilience. Some species may conserve energy and resources by reducing flowering or not flowering at all this year. While we may miss these flowers, know that we'll likely see them next year.

Smoke from the wildfires up north also remind us of how powerful fire can be locally and globally. While boreal forests in Canada or the Mediterranean woodlands

of France and Spain show how quickly wildfires can grow in an era of climate change, proactive fire management and continued research and practice of prescribed fire are instrumental for understanding the future of ecosystems the world over. *Dehesas* and dry forests in Spain, Brazilian Cerrado savannas, eucalyptus forests and heathlands in Australia and the pine savannas of the southeastern US all require prescribed fire to minimize wildfire risk and promote ecosystem services. While these ecosystems all require nuanced applications of fire, the work we do to re-introduce prescribed fire to landscapes in southern Wisconsin is a reflection of how western science is continuing to learn just how important fire can be.

Late summer marks the beginning of the annual push to harvest and process native plant seed. With native seed availability being a major limitation to improving the biodiversity of restored habitats, ethical and proper collecting and processing of seeds from your own property can be an excellent resource for you and your neighbors. Sharing seed and plugs for native species gives you a chance to get to know the life history of each individual species while also connecting you to friends and neighbors. And if seed collecting is a newer skill for you, groups like The Prairie Enthusiasts or Dane County have an abundance of opportunities to volunteer and learn from others. Good things come in small packages.



Focus in on BMAP: Property site visits

One of the many benefits to members of the Blue Mounds Area Project (BMAP) is a free site visit to their properties from our staff ecologist Sam Anderson. He will discuss your goals for restoration and see where you are in that process, assess any obstacles and make suggestions on amending those goals. He may find things that you didn't even know may be a problem. A month or so later, you will receive a full report with information regarding obstacles and suggestions on how to proceed. BMAP provides this service to members who own land, the cost of which is roughly \$300 per site visit. Our Ecologist is an employee of BMAP and earns an hourly wage. While this service is free to members, any donation after a visit is very much appreciated and helps with sustaining this unique, free service.

The pesky, invasive common burdock is an aggressive weed that crowds out native plants and is a danger to birds and bats. Experts say it's better to get rid of it early on because its roots grow deep.

'The same hymnal'

continued from page 1

Retention pond at Vermont Church Legacy Prairie and Woodland

Photo by Kim Lamoreaux



“Would the former owner sell off the property for development?”

Antonie said. “That became a concern for us as a congregation. We said there’s a better use for that property.”

That was the beginning of the church’s fundraising campaign for the “Legacy Fund” in 2019 and was so successful that in January 2022, the church had the funds to buy the property. They immediately set out to expand the church’s cemetery and established the Legacy Prairie and Woodland.

In 2025, the church purchased the homestead of its original pastor, Pastor John Fjeld, (pronounced field, ironically enough), hired in the 1870s. Vermont Church was built in 1913.

Thus began the “choir” joined by a combination of public agencies, private contractors and conservation organizations alike.

Vermont Church members held a meeting at the Vermont town hall with the Black Earth Creek Watershed Association, (BECWA), the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department, the Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Trout Unlimited.

“I said we’re going to have a meeting where we’re all going to sing out of the same hymnal,” Antonie said. “We just want to figure out what’s the best thing to do with this piece of property.”

Private contractors were hired to help with water remediation, wetland preservation and conservation and management of the woodlands and prairies. Trails were cleared and a boardwalk built for passage over wetland areas.

The result was the conservation and protection of 105 acres of beautiful prairie, woodland and wetland with 5.5 miles of hiking trails all of which are open to the public.

Water quality of the Vermont Creek is in peak condition for trout fishing.

The DNR’s fish shocking and sampling in July of 2025 found 77 trout in a 436-foot section of Vermont Creek, the largest being a 14-inch brown trout.

“There is no need for streambank or habitat improvements,” Antonie said. “When (the DNR sampling) was finished, they said you don’t need to do anything. Just don’t screw it up.”

Antonie and Herrling are eager for members of the public to visit the Legacy Prairie and Woodland to soak in its beauty and enjoy hiking or getting on a golf cart to traverse the land. They encourage use of their meeting room they call the Gathering Place for all organizations and groups.

“People see reverence in viewing nature,” Herrling said. “It serves a purpose that’s good and we hope that people enjoy it and tell others about it.”



The Vermont Church Legacy Prairie and Woodland is located at 9886 Vermont Church Rd., Black Earth, Wisconsin
vermontlutheran.org/legacy-prairie-woodland/



Speed dating gone wild

Southern Driftless Grasslands holds match making exercise for landowners and ecological experts

By Kim Lamoreaux

Imagine a speed dating event where everyone has the same thing in common—restoring and preserving the land they own.

There were no awkward minutes of silence when the staff of the Southern Driftless Grasslands (SDG) and 10 other ecological groups met with 15 potential landowner partners in May at the old Blue Mounds Opera House.

The focus, said SDG's Partnership Coordinator, Andy Bingle, was on learning what programs and processes were available via public and non-profit organizations that support landowners in areas like prairie restoration, forestry, agriculture, wild life, land trusts and more.

"Each landowner would visit each professional and talk about what programs might be available to them," Bingle said. "It was really positive and a good, fast way to see who the partners are in the region to help manage your land."

Bingle said the concept of speed dating for land conservation program experts came from an organization in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains that organized a speed dating themed workshop where landowners get 10 minutes with a conservation expert. When a bell rings, landowners rotate to the next table.

The Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative's speed dating idea came from the idea that what if there was a way for a farmer to meet all of us at the same time in a fun way?



Pheasants Forever Educational Outreach and Training Coordinator Olivia Horton-Pacana meets with two landowners at the Southern Driftless Grasslands conservation speed dating workshop in May.

BMAP Board Member Larry Hartzke got his first glimpse at what speed dating was like when he attended the event.

"On each landowner's table, SDG provided a large aerial photo of their parcel and a list of the conservation resource specialists attending the workshop," Hartzke said. "At the conclusion of these short, round-robin sessions with knowledgeable experts, participants agreed that the specialists provided valuable information on how best to address the challenges faced by landowners."

SDG Open House



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BMAP Presents



The Blue Mounds Area Project (BMAP) has become known for its excellent Winter Conversations lectures. The 2027 scheduled presentations are just as compelling with topics including the importance of prescribed burning as a land management tool, woodland management and a presentation that helps landowners partner with conservation groups and agencies.

Feb. 11

Jeb Barzen

Chair - Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council

"Wisconsin's Natural Resources are Shaped by Fire"

Jeb Barzen is likely the only person that can make the claim of being labeled "an American arsonist" by Pravda after a 2012 trip to Russia as a consultant for prescribed burning.



"That's how they translated a pyroecologist," Barzen said. "You'd think it's a bad thing. That's part of our conversation. People think of prescribed fire when they hear about wild fires that burn whole towns in California. So, talking about prescribed fire is in merging visions very different from each other."

Most of our species of conservation concern require fire during some portion of their life cycle. Most ecosystem services benefit from frequent, low intensity fire. Yet, until recently, fire has largely been removed from Wisconsin's landscape and culture. At what cost? Can we reverse this trend? Is it safe? Attend and discover the world of prescribed fire!

Feb. 25

Andy Bingle

Project Manager - Southern Driftless Grasslands

"Overcome Challenges By Activating Your Superpower - A Look at the Superpowers of Partnerships"



Great challenges rarely fall to a single hero - they're overcome by teams that combine diverse strengths.

This talk explores how the Southern Driftless Grasslands

Continued on page 7

BMAPNEWS



The Blue Mounds Area Project Newsletter is published three times yearly with Spring, Winter and Fall issues.

We welcome your comments, submissions and advertisements.

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Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund Program Obituary?

Reprinted from the July 1 issue of the Wisconsin Examiner. The BMAP News has edited this article for length.

The Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Grant program, established in 1989 to help Wisconsin obtain and maintain its natural areas, expired on July 30. Cause of death according to advocates—legislative obstinance.

Since its inception, the program has enjoyed broad support from voters and has been seen as a national model for land conservation systems. However, in recent years, a handful of Republican legislators — largely representing the northern parts of the state — began to sour on the program's aims.

Proposals that aimed to bring together bipartisan support to continue the program from Gov. Tony Evers,

a handful of Republicans and the Legislature's Democratic caucus failed to gain traction during the most recent legislative session.

"Scoring a few political points in the Capitol at the expense of your community and of your voters just encapsulates what people hate about politics right now," said Charles Carlin, the director of strategic initiatives for Gathering Waters, an alliance of 40 land trusts around Wisconsin. "It undermines their own communities, and I would hope



Erbe Grassland is a 140-acre preserve in the Town of Blue Mounds in owned and managed by The Prairie Enthusiasts Empire-Sauk Chapter. Acquisition of this land was supported, in part, by grants from the Wisconsin State Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund.

that they are questioning that choice, perhaps regretting it. I think we're all going to be looking to see what happens in November, and to see, gosh, are there consequences for choosing to govern like that?"

Continued on page 9

Winter Conversations

continued from page 6

leverages the unique "superpowers" of its partner organizations in southwest Wisconsin to navigate funding gaps, capacity limits, and complex landscape scale conservation needs.

Through real-world examples, it highlights how collaboration builds resilience and shows how recognizing your own strengths can help drive meaningful change. The talk will also explore how to unlock your superpower as a landowner and how to make a meaningful conservation impact on your land and beyond. You can read Bingle's article "Activating Your Superpower: Overcoming Challenges Through Partnerships" here: <https://driftlessconservancy.org/conservation-partnerships>.

March 11

Olivia Kovacs

Regional Natural Resources Educator - UW Extension

"Sustainable Stewardship of Wisconsin's Privately Owned Forests"



Owners of wooded acreage, you might want to save the date for this one.

It's an opportunity for private landowners to get an overview of programs available for woodland management.

Of all the acres of Wisconsin's woodlands, 65-70 percent are privately owned. Olivia Kovacs is a UW Extension

Columbia County whose focus is forestry outreach.

Kovacs leads classes and builds programs to engage those landowners in the sustainable stewardship of Wisconsin's privately owned forests.

She works with all ranges of woodland owners from their first steps and those who are more well versed. Among her introductory classes is one regarding invasive species and how to make a plan to manage them. As an educator, she gives classes pertaining to woodland management and ecological restoration, even a women's chain saw class.

"Anyone can sign up for a class," Kovacs said, "but we target those who own woodlands or who are new to owning land, like under five years."

Find out more about the UW Extension here: <https://naturalresources.extension.wisc.edu/>



Prescribed Fire Council hires first ever executive director

By Lucas LoBreglio, WPFC Program Specialist

The Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council (WPFC) marked a significant milestone in its nearly 20-year history hiring its first Executive Director, Rose Brown, in August.

Brown joins WPFC with a proven record of nonprofit leadership, strategic planning, fundraising, partnership development, volunteer engagement, and organizational expansion. Throughout her career, she has successfully guided nonprofit organizations in multiple states through periods of growth building collaborative relationships that strengthen missions and expand community impact.

"Rose's experience building organizations, cultivating partnerships, and empowering volunteers makes her an ideal leader for this next chapter," said Jeb Barzen, Chair of the WPFC Board of Directors. "Her leadership will complement the tremendous work already being accomplished by WPFC while helping us expand our capacity statewide."

Barzen said Wisconsin needs to be burning 1 million acres for the ecological health of woodlands and prairies. Currently, only about 75,000 acres are under scheduled prescribed burns.

"For all the BMAP NEWS readers, they almost all own land that needs fire," Barzen said. "All of the driftless area needs fire and almost none of it's getting it. To take on a task like that, you need professionals creating a base from which volunteers can expand.

That's what we're trying to do to get Wisconsin to go to a million acres."

Brown will work alongside WPFC's experienced staff, board of directors, committee members, volunteers, agency partners, nonprofit organizations, tribal nations, contractors, landowners and prescribed burn associations to implement the WPFC's long-term vision.

"The path to one million acres is not about one person or one organization," Brown said.

"It's about empowering thousands of people across Wisconsin with the knowledge, confidence, and support to use prescribed fire safely."

Through education, collaboration and advocacy the WPFC is working to increase Wisconsin's prescribed fire capacity, address critical conservation needs, enhance public understanding, and serve as a unified voice for the prescribed fire community.



Rose Brown

BMAP Welcomes New Members

Cynthia Way
Matthew Ramsey & Zoe Austermann
Ken & Susan Owens
Christopher Solomon & Margaret Greco
Barb Sawle
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Knowles-Nelson

continued from page 7

Sen. Jodi Habush Sinykin (D-Whitefish Bay), one of the authors of the failed Democratic bill to reauthorize the program, told the Examiner Monday that the expiration was just a “pause.”

Habush Sinykin said that she’s working on ways to get a Knowles-Nelson bill through the Legislature no matter the

result of the November elections.

“We’ll find out just in a matter of months what we have to work with,” she said. “But we have quite a bit of give with regard to how we can keep the program going forward productively, in terms of funding and for oversight mechanisms. And again, I would be certainly grateful to be able to work across the aisle and with legislators in my own party to come up with the Knowles Nelson reauthorization program that makes sense for Wisconsin.”



Experts warn of growing stiltgrass invasion

Sky Hershberger

Forestry Communications Specialist

University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension

Forestry & Wildlife Program

Forestry and wildlife ecologists in Wisconsin are sounding the alarm over a new invasive plant known as Japanese stiltgrass and experts are urging landowners to search for it and prevent it from spreading in the region.

Stiltgrass, (*Microstegium vimineum*), is a non-native annual grass that poses a significant threat to Wisconsin’s ecosystems. It grows in branching, sprawling mats in forests, streams, trails, ditches, and even lawns. In the eastern and southern U.S., including Illinois, it’s widespread and negatively impacting forests.

“This plant is quite harmful to our forests,” said Mark Renz, a professor and extension weed specialist at UW–Madison. “It makes wildfires more frequent and severe, alters nutrient cycling and soil microbes, and reduces wildlife habitat, all of which decreases biodiversity.”

Stiltgrass flowers in September, but if it’s found, there is still time to control it before it produces seed.

Renz said owners and other land stewards in southern Wisconsin—especially Rock, Grant, Lafayette, Green, Walworth, and Kenosha counties—should search neighborhoods and woodlands for stiltgrass and report it if it’s found. Early detection is crucial to help understand the scope of the problem and coordinate management strategies to protect the woods.

“In addition to monitoring, make sure to clean your boots, clothes, pets, vehicles, and equipment before traveling from one woods to another,” Renz said.

Sightings of stiltgrass should be reported to:

Extension Forestry: forestry@extension.wisc.edu or call Working Lands Forestry Educator Tony Johnson at 608-386-8900.

Wisconsin DNR: email invasive.species@wisconsin.gov.



Stiltgrass poses a significant threat to Wisconsin’s ecosystems. It grows in branching, sprawling mats in forests, streams, trails, ditches, and even lawns.



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A ride from Madison to Blue Mounds 200 years ago

Part 2

By Bob Wernerehl

Editor's Note: The following is the second installment of former BMAP ecologist Bob Wernerehl's research of early 19th century accounts describing the landscape around Blue Mounds. It picks up with the account written by William Rudolph Smith of Philadelphia, who spent an entire summer in Grant, Iowa, Lafayette and Dane Counties in 1837. The BMAP News has edited for space and context.

One of the most notable observations in Smith's descriptions of his travels through Grant, Iowa, Lafayette and Dane counties is the lack of forest. Arguably, one of a potential resident's necessary products at that time.

"There is a want of timber," Smith wrote. "Generally speaking, in the rich prairies the groves of timber are small and scattered, not affording sufficient wood for more than one or two large farms, for many miles in extent.

"...as for fire wood," Smith writes, "a sufficiency may always be readily obtained within a short distance of any farm and if the annual fires on the prairies are prevented or subdued by the care and exertions of the settlers, the timber of the country is of the most rapid growth."

Smith was seeing the start of the rapid forest growth in southwestern Wisconsin. Other writers noted this phenomenon of the woods growing quickly after fire suppression.

John Muir, naturalist, author, early advocate for the preservation of wilderness area and famously known as the "Father of the National Parks," immigrated as a child from Scotland to Marquette County.

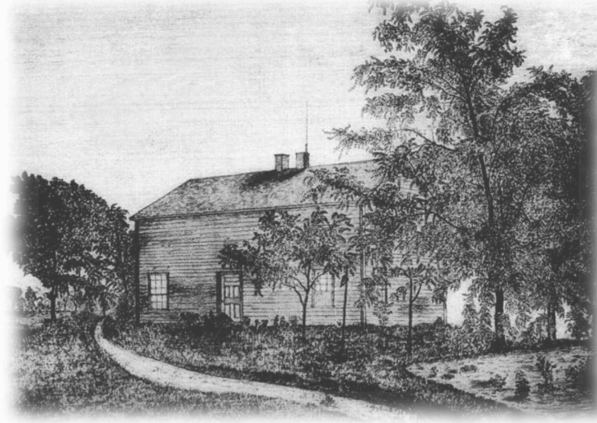
"Within three to four years, almost every quarter section of government land was taken up...and in a very short time the new country began to look like an old one..." Muir wrote as a young

man in the 1850s. "As soon as the oak openings in our neighborhood were settled and the farmers prevented running grassfires, the grubs grew up into trees and formed tall thickets—so dense that it was difficult to walk through them—and every trace of the sunny openings vanished."

In 1859, a writer for The Baraboo Republic newspaper stated, "In the timbered areas in the western end of the Baraboo valley, the pioneers are obliged to wear buckskin or other very strong material for pants since there is such a formidable undergrowth of plum, wild crabapple, prickly ash, briars and vines."

Despite this rapid growth, some savanna character to the land was maintained, in part, through pasturing cattle.

However, farmers continued their tradition of fire.



John Muir's sketch of his childhood home near Portage Wisconsin. (from "The Story of My Boyhood and Youth")

'Fires burned all night'

For generations, fires were allowed to burn uncontrolled. Fast forward about 100 years, uncontrolled became controversial. In 1871, the Peshtigo fire in Marinette County burned over a million acres and killed more than 1,200 people. It was the deadliest wildfire in Wisconsin's history. Its headlines were somewhat dwarfed by the Great Chicago Fire on the very same day.

It was 24 years before the government intervened with arbitrarily set fires when

Wisconsin adopted its first fire management-related laws, appointing 249 town fire wardens around the state. It took the state until 1919 to establish fire protection districts and until 1925 to enact a new burning permit law.

By the 50s, fire control zones of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, (now named Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource) were being established by county.

Some more senior farmers in Iowa County have been quoted saying that in the "old days", fires burned all night through the woods. Sometimes they were set to produce a better crop of huckleberries, still found today near sandstone outcrops.

When fire control first went in to effect, long time game warden and author, the late Jim Chizek, was quoted saying, "Citizens were incensed when rangers and wardens entered their lands uninvited to fight fires they deliberately set to 'green up the landscape.'"



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The more you know...

For a deeper dive into some of the topics covered in this newsletter, here is a list of relevant links that will be active in our digital version.

Vermont Church Legacy Prairie and Woodland
<https://vermontlutheran.org/legacy-prairie-woodland/>

"Activating Your Superpower: Overcoming Challenges Through Partnerships" <https://driftlessconservancy.org/conservation-partnerships>
RSVP to the Southern Driftless Grasslands Open House on Oct. 1
<https://www.driftlessgrasslands.org/event-details/social-gathering-sdg-open-house-sdg>

The Knowles-Nelson Fund
<https://knowlesnelson.org/>
Wisconsin Prescribed Fire Council
<https://prescribedfire.org/>

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This rustic sign along Vermont Church Road greets site seers as they enter the church's 35-acre property restored to natural prairies with public access to beautiful hiking trails. Using Green Infrastructure practices, church members led the way to minimize erosion with the construction of a plunge pool, dam and detention pond. In addition, they preserved 20 acres of wetland including a portion of Vermont Creek and are managing the woodland to maximize its habitat for wildlife. Photo by Kim Lamoreaux

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