

# LIVING LANDS

Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity



NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2009

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## Living Lands

*Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity*

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The "core" of Forrest Nature Preserve *Photo Courtesy of BSC*

## BLACK SWAMP CONSERVANCY—REVIVING AN ANCIENT SWAMP

An update from a 2008 Living Lands Biodiversity Grant Recipient

*By Rob Krain*

**B**lack Swamp Conservancy (BSC) was not looking to manage property. Like many land trusts, the conservancy's focus is protecting land through conservation easements, not through ownership. But in 2003 when the opportunity arose to purchase one of the most significant 80-acre tracts in the state of Ohio they just couldn't let it pass.

The Forrest family had been searching for a way to preserve their property for years. But without a park district in their rural community, there were few options to ensure that the integrity of the land would be upheld. With help from the Clean Ohio Greenspace Program and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), a generous below-market sale was made to BSC. Over the next five years, the small land trust worked with the Forrests and two other

conservation-minded landowners to expand the preserve to the 250+ acres that it is today. Forrest Woods Nature Preserve is one of the last remaining areas retaining the characteristics of the historic Great Black Swamp that once stretched more than 1,500 square miles from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Ohio's Lake Erie shoreline.

The core of the Forrest property features a floodplain forest situated along Marie DeLarme Creek, a tributary of the Maumee River. The expansive wetlands include a series of oxbows and vernal pools that are a hotbed of biodiversity. Boasting 80 species of herbaceous flora in a sample plot, rare, threatened and endangered species abound in the often murky lowland, including the four-toed salamander,

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Blanding's turtle, leafy blue flag, "false hop" sedge and big-fruited dodder. More than 130 bird species (nine state-listed) have been documented at the preserve, which is recognized as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society.

As BSC expanded the preserve, it acquired several upland farm fields. With limited manpower and resources, the conservancy kept these fields in production, renting them to a local farmer. By cropping the land they were able to discourage invasive species growth, but there were other issues to address. In particular, a 2007 Forrest Woods management plan developed in coordination with ODNR's Division of Natural Heritage Areas and Preserves (DNAP), identified two primary threats to the property: sedimentation and agrichemical runoff.

### Helping the Land Along

In early 2008, the BSC added a second full-time staff member for the first time in its 15-year history. Rob Krain, who had done consulting work on a number of BSC projects, was hired as stewardship manager. The addition has expanded the conservancy's capacity to pursue strategic land projects, provide management support to its landowners and institute restoration projects at Forrest Woods.

followed by an unusually dry summer and near-drought conditions well into the fall. Nonetheless, some of the grass seed germinated and a surprising amount of native wildflowers and other vegetation emerged from the seed bank. In the early summer, while the fields were still fairly wet, hundreds upon hundreds of leopard frogs and other amphibians and reptiles came up from the lowlands to utilize the burgeoning habitat in the restoration area. "That really impressed on me the importance of this project," Krain remarked. "Every step that I took in those fields, 10 or 15 tiny frogs would scatter from underfoot." Even more exciting, an amateur naturalist reported possible silver-bordered fritillary and regal fritillary butterfly sightings in the upland fields this past July. The regal is extremely rare and some believe it to be extirpated from Ohio, but it is occasionally documented in nearby Indiana.



Native species appearing in restoration area include Partridge Pea (left) and Hedge Nettle (right)  
*Photo courtesy of BSC and Terri Gorney*

### Looking Ahead

The ultimate project goal is reforestation, but the conservancy and its partners at DNAP aren't trying to rush Mother Nature. Instead of bringing in outside saplings, hundreds of hardwood seeds were collected from the old-growth stand last fall. They'll be planted in the uplands this spring. By using seed collected on-site, the conservancy hopes to propagate the local genetics hidden in the maple, hickory, ash and ancient oak trees.



View of restoration areas in May (left) and September (right) *Photos Courtesy of BSC*

The conservancy's approach isn't one of intense management. "We'll help things along, but for the most part we're just letting the forest reclaim the fields" says Krain. Since arriving at BSC, he's been working with DNAP to design a restoration project that will preserve the ecological integrity of the site and can be implemented with limited manpower and a modest budget.

In order to address immediate threats of erosion and non-point source pollutants, BSC used funding from their Living Lands grant and DNAP to plant native prairie grasses in the upland fields last spring. Krain hoped that this planting would also increase habitat value and help out-compete invasive species. Some fields were taken out of production and left unseeded to provide a control sample. 2008 turned out to be a difficult growing season in northwest Ohio. Excessive rains and flooding late in the spring were

Invasive species removal begins in the fall of 2009 with plans to focus on woody species such as Japanese honeysuckle, autumn olive and multi-flora rose, which tend to flourish in disturbed areas throughout the region. As a tree canopy develops, the conservancy expects that other common invasives will be shaded out. This project provides a great opportunity for BSC to grow its stewardship program. The focus remains on land conservation and the conservancy still prefers to hold a conservation easement over a deed. But aside from the clear importance of protecting the "core" of Forrest Woods, the knowledge and skills that the land trust is gaining from this process enables BSC to better serve and advise the private-landowners and partners.

*Rob Krain is the Stewardship Manager at the Black Swamp Conservancy in Ohio. To learn more please visit [www.blackswamp.org](http://www.blackswamp.org)*

## DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE'S VOLUNTEER CORPS IS AVAILABLE TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR PROJECTS

Spring is finally here! With the warm weather slowly bringing nature back to life again, you may be considering tackling some of those exciting field projects that winter put on hold. Do you have invasive weeds to pull, critters to count or habitat to restore? Do you wish you had a few more hands to help in the effort? Defenders can help! Our Wildlife Volunteer Corps is ready to lend an enthusiastic hand—or several—to your important wildlife projects.

### How Does it Work?

Defenders has more than 725,000 members and activists all across the country who are just itching for an opportunity to roll up their sleeves and make a difference for wildlife in their communities.

Simply contact us with a project idea and we will be in touch to

coordinate the rest. We'll handle all the details of volunteer recruitment and coordination, leaving you more time for project development. Defenders may even be able to reach out to local media to cover your project and highlight your work! The Wildlife Volunteer Corps has successfully organized dozens of volunteer projects all around the country including removing invasive species, monitoring and surveying wildlife and restoring habitat.

*"One person can only do so much. However, a group of dedicated individuals can really change things and make a significant impact. It is this camaraderie, idealism and spirit that really make a project."*

**-Kristina Vagos, a Volunteer Corps Project Manager**



Invasive species removal crew, Virginia Photo courtesy of Aimee Weldon

Have a project in mind? Get started now by contacting [bbovard@defenders.org](mailto:bbovard@defenders.org) For general information visit [www.defenders.org/take\\_action/wvc/](http://www.defenders.org/take_action/wvc/). To suggest a project and review our project guidelines visit:

[www.defenders.org/take\\_action/wvc/suggest\\_a\\_project.php](http://www.defenders.org/take_action/wvc/suggest_a_project.php)

## THE CONSERVATION REGISTRY NATIONAL BETA RELEASE

Defenders of Wildlife is pleased to announce the national beta release of our new Conservation Registry ([www.conservationregistry.org](http://www.conservationregistry.org)), a free online database that enables land trusts and other conservation groups to quickly and easily map, track and search conservation projects across the landscape. The database can store and track information on actions such as land protection or acquisition, habitat restoration, management, monitoring and more. Defenders developed the registry as a way to help conservation practitioners work more strategically by identifying areas where priorities overlap with opportunities and efforts on the ground.

Land trusts will find the Conservation Registry an important tool for displaying local, state and national project information. But perhaps more important, the registry also serves as a centralized management and tracking tool for your own projects. Users can add projects to the map and quickly view them in the context of the broader conservation landscape without the

need for GIS. Additional project information including partners, goals, habitat data, funding needs, images and links can also be included, much of it by selection through pre-populated drop-down menus. Users may share non-sensitive

project information with partners, potential funders and the public while keeping other information strictly confidential.

For examples of how land trusts are already using the Conservation Registry to tell their stories, check out the Eastern Sierra Land Trust in California or the Kentucky Natural Lands Trust.

The registry was successfully piloted in the Pacific Northwest and Defenders and our many partners are now working hard to

populate the remainder of the national map with additional data layers that will maximize its utility to land managers and planners. We encourage you to visit and enter information about your work to help advance this important effort.



For more information about the Conservation Registry, please contact Gina LaRocco at [glarocco@defenders.org](mailto:glarocco@defenders.org).

## RESTORING THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY... ONE TRACT AT A TIME

Deep in southern Texas, along the last 275 river-miles of the Rio Grande, a diverse group of partners are continuing a 30-year effort to restore what was once a lush river habitat and flood plain. Native habitats include riparian forest, inland Tamaulipan thorn forest and mesquite savannah grasslands. The project, aptly named the Wildlife Corridor, stretches through four counties and 11 different biotic communities and includes some of the most biologically diverse habitats anywhere north of the Mexican border. Over the years, more than 95 percent of the original native habitat has disappeared, replaced by blacktop, carpet-grassed yards and agricultural fields.

### Building a Wildlife Highway

With the establishment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) National Wildlife Refuge in 1979, a movement arose to create a continuous corridor from Falcon Dam in Starr County to the Gulf of Mexico in Cameron County. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is the main stakeholder and partner in this ambitious endeavor, which depends on partners such as The Nature Conservancy, Audubon, Texas Parks & Wildlife and many other organizations and private landowners to make it a success. Once finished the refuge should comprise some 132,000 acres laid out in many tracts connected by habitat corridors to create a natural wildlife "highway" of sorts. Since so few unaltered native tracts remain, much of the lands purchased for the refuge are old farm fields, rather than pristine natural areas.

### An Innovative Partnership

The challenge of establishing the corridor had led to the emergence of an innovative partnership-based system to restore these bare fields to thriving habitats. The system, developed by USFWS, involves local farmers, a local nature center and local native plant growers. It starts by identifying important farmland for sale by willing sellers within wildlife priority areas that contribute to the goal of tying important habitats together. Land is bought at fair-market value and, once purchased, a study is done to determine the historic native plant community. This information is used to determine the right mix of plants to restore to the tract.

The farmer who once owned the land is asked up front to join in a voluntary cooperative farming agreement with the refuge that will allow him or her to lease back the property from USFWS and continue to farm it until the tract is ready for restoration. Farmers agree to restrict certain farm practices such as chemical use, the type of crops grown and the methods of tilling the land.

The annual lease funds from the farmer go back into the program to purchase native seedlings needed to be used to restore the land. The agricultural profits go to the farmer. The Valley Nature Center (VNC), a privately owned nonprofit environmental education nature center in the

Rio Grande Valley, then uses the lease funds to contract with local native plant growers who grow about 100,000 seedlings annually to aid in restoration. USFWS also grows about 120,000 seedlings per year at a nursery located on a refuge tract.



Growing native seedlings Photo Courtesy of Martin Hagne

The farmers are responsible for revegetating the land, mostly with their own laborers and equipment but sometimes with assistance from USFWS staff and volunteers. In past years the farmer planted 10 percent of the tract each year. After 10 years the tract was fully restored and the farming lease agreement ended. That has now changed to better meet strategic restoration goals and farmers now lease until a tract is ready for complete revegetation.

### Impressive Results

The Rio Grande Wildlife Corridor Project has now been in place for nine years and has successfully turned bare dirt into native habitats to the tune of about 1,000 acres per year using cooperative farming agreements. Current efforts use denser



Photo Courtesy of Martin Hagne



Revegetating old farm fields

Photo courtesy of USFWS

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plantings resulting in 400 acres per year. Some 220,000 native seedlings are planted annually and numerous outside partnering organizations are involved—some of whom are often at opposite sides of conservation issues. The earliest restoration efforts have now matured to produce habitats for the thousands of wildlife species found here and each year new ideas emerge to improve and streamline the process.

“This model can be replicated on any landscape with the right partners and a little creativity” says Martin Hagne, executive director of the Valley Nature Center. “The program works because it benefits everyone involved. Farmers continue making a profit off their land well after the final sale, local nurseries are assured a reliable source of annual income, conservation groups are able to quickly and affordably achieve their restoration goals and the many wildlife species in the region are given a new chance of



Aerial view of farm fields planted from 1998-2009

survival in this highly altered landscape”.

Unfortunately, all the effort to restore the Wildlife Corridor over the last 30 years is threatened by U.S.-Mexico border wall construction. Construction of the wall has already isolated tracts of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Refuge preventing both wildlife and wildlife managers from accessing important habitat. Defenders and others are working to improve border policy to prevent this type of damage in the future.

**For more information on agencies, organizations and border issues please visit:** Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR:

<http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=21552> The Friends of the Wildlife Corridor:

<http://www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org/default.asp?id=238>

The Valley Nature Center: <http://www.valleynaturecenter.org/>  
Defenders of Wildlife: <http://www.defenders.org/border>

## COMMUNICATING ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING

With a dramatically changing climate threatening our native wildlife and habitats, wise land use and land protection decisions are more critical than ever. While knowledge and acceptance of global warming is rising in the general public, communicating the complexities of this highly nuanced topic with lay audiences remains a challenge. To provide some clarity on how to talk about global warming, Defenders of Wildlife partnered with The Nature Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation to conduct focus groups and surveys of our members. Through this process we learned a few things that we wanted to share with you.

**1. Use the term global warming, not climate change.** While scientists will say that climate change is the most accurate term, in poll after poll, global warming is the term that resonates most strongly with people.

**2. People want to hear messages of hope balanced with the threats.** The impacts of global warming can be overwhelming. In order to change people’s behavior, we need to give them a reason to hope.



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**3. Emphasize that what affects nature affects people as well.** Provide local examples of fisheries that are being depleted, water sources that are being exhausted, migration patterns that are changing and how these impact all of us.

**4. People like solutions that are as big as the problem.** Although solutions such as changing your light bulbs are important, people also want to know that larger solutions exist to address this complex global problem. Restoring forests is one example. In all of our testing, people understood that

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## COMMUNICATING ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING

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protecting and restoring forests is an intuitive and cost-effective way to address global warming on a relevant scale.

### Key Talking Points

We used the feedback from our focus groups to develop a few key talking points that you may find useful. The following statements are widely accepted and supported:

- We must find a better way to power our future and to protect and preserve our planet. The United States should become a leader in clean energy technology to reduce greenhouse gas pollution while safeguarding our country's wildlife and natural resources and creating millions of new jobs.
- Global warming is already impacting all of us: threatening the water we drink, the air we breathe, the medicines we use, the food we eat, the forests and fisheries we depend on and the special places we take our children.
- We all rely on nature for survival. When we reduce global warming pollution and invest in ways to safeguard nature and wildlife, we are also helping ourselves.

- The longer we wait to solve this challenge, the more expensive it will be to our society. Future generations need us to invest now in new strategies to safeguard our natural resources. We need to protect the nature of tomorrow from the impacts of today.
- Scientists warn that we have less than a decade to reduce global warming if we are to avoid its most destructive impacts. Reducing greenhouse gas pollution alone is not sufficient. We must look beyond this and take proactive steps to protect our wildlife and natural resources before it's too late.
- Safeguarding our forests is one of the most cost effective and common-sense ways to decrease the amount of carbon in our atmosphere, while also protecting habitat for wildlife.

These results parallel a recent poll that found "we need to find a better way to power our future and a better way to protect and preserve our planet" was the **number one message** for the general public. Global warming is a pressing challenge that everyone must understand. We hope that these survey results will help you to better communicate this complex topic to your local communities and landowners.

### Living Lands—Helping Land Trusts Conserve Biodiversity

Living Lands is a Defenders of Wildlife project to support the work of local land trusts interested in protecting, enhancing and restoring native wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

Funded through generous support from the Biophilia Foundation, the Living Lands Project assists local land trusts in making strategic decisions about where to work to conserve high-priority native habitats and species and how to work to use effective land stewardship to restore and manage habitats for long-term benefits. We also help land trusts secure funding for projects that benefit wildlife and habitat. Through the Living Lands project,

Defenders of Wildlife is collaborating with the Land Trust Alliance to assist local land trusts through a variety of approaches, including technical and financial assistance.

The Living Lands Project involves individual land trusts, state and federal agencies, conservation groups and other organizations and individuals that support land trusts in their habitat conservation efforts.



If you would like to be removed from our e-mail list, please send a message to [livinglands@defenders.org](mailto:livinglands@defenders.org)

**Vision:** *A network of land trusts, working with private and public partners, to protect, restore and manage our living lands for biodiversity.*

**Mission:** *To support and increase the capacity of the land trust community to conserve biodiversity on private lands through financial and technical assistance.*

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