



# The Rookery

FALL 2022





# THIS WORK

## *Matters*

I recently had the pleasure of attending the Land Trust Alliance's national conference, a gathering of more than one thousand dedicated conservationists from across the country and beyond. The trainings at this event are always insightful ... they range from the nuts & bolts of land protection and stewardship work to emerging trends in the conservation community, and the latest developments in conservation defense. I filled a notebook with practical pointers and new ideas.

But, the real excitement of gathering with so many conservation professionals is the opportunity to learn from one another about the great work each organization is accomplishing in its own community. Collectively, land trusts across the U.S. permanently protect more than 61 million acres of land, almost as much as the national park system. It is energizing to think of the scale of the conservation community and the role that Black Swamp Conservancy plays in the larger picture. More important though, is what each individual conservation project means to its community and the benefits it provides.

This issue of The Rookery highlights some of the important conservation work that your support of Black Swamp Conservancy is making possible right here in northwest Ohio. We are preserving key pieces of our landscape, rebuilding critical natural habitats and creating spaces for outdoor recreation and hands-on education. This work matters. Each project the Conservancy accomplishes makes our community an even better place to work, play and live.

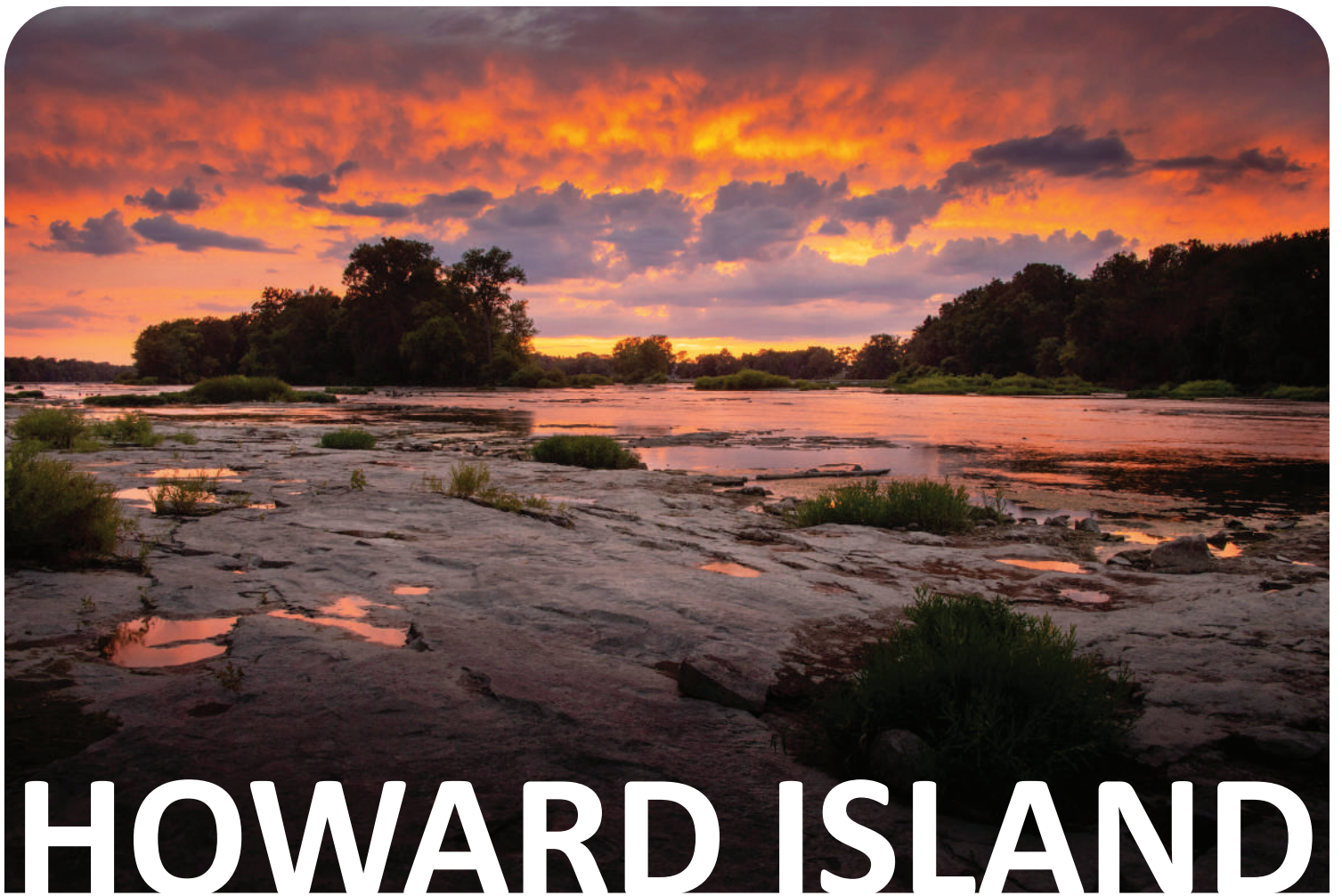
Thank you for supporting the Conservancy and investing in northwest Ohio's valuable natural resources. Together we are making a difference.



Stay well,

**Rob Krain**  
**Executive Director**





# HOWARD ISLAND

photographed by Art Weber

## *Sunset Landmark*

Our Maumee River starts small and slow, snaking through nearly flat land, coming north and east. Then, between Grand Rapids and Providence, Ohio, the river is wide and hits its first fast water and river rapids. Standing in the middle of the Maumee River there, shaped like a fish swimming upstream, is beautiful 9-acre Howard Island. The waters of the Maumee roll around it from its nose to its tail and pick up speed falling around it down the shallow, rocky riverbed.

This unique and beautiful island has just been purchased by the Conservancy from a private owner with funds from the H2Ohio program. It was one of the last Maumee River islands held in private hands and its acquisition is a rare opportunity to preserve it forever.

Visitors to the village of Grand Rapids and Mary Jane Thurston State Park are familiar with view of Howard Island. It

is in the center of the river, connected to both shores and to smaller Buttonwood Island by lowhead dams. It is the cherished sunset view for people in the village walking along the towpath trail between a side cut canal and the Maumee River.

The island is nearly untouched by development. There are a few narrow footpaths and previous owners have done some hunting, but all the trees, soil, and stone are as they have been forever. The Conservancy has no plans to build structures for people on the island but is looking into an intriguing idea that would allow fish better access to historical spawning habitat upriver from the dam.

The dam serves as a wall to fish, abruptly stopping their upstream movement. Water flows continuously over its top, but the structure has a shape that holds water in a “keeper” flow. This shape slows and baffles water, which is helpful for

preventing erosion, but fish need to fight their way through it. The Conservancy is investigating whether a fish ladder or other passage can be constructed through the body of Howard Island. If a ladder is feasible, the Maumee’s walleye and whitefish would once again have easy access to about 21 miles of new spawning habitat, as far west as the Independence Dam near Defiance. Giving the fish of the Maumee all this range would change the life of the river forever. It would be nationally significant.

The first step is to conduct a feasibility study to determine our likelihood of success. If so, funding and construction could take several years. But Howard island has all the time in the world. It is now permanently preserved and will remain a landmark in the big Maumee, nose to the west, swimming toward the sunset.





Inside a deep and playful curl in the Sandusky River north of Fremont are about 500 historic acres that have been saved over and over again. They are saved for good but – much like the river itself – it has been a long and winding path.

Peninsular Farms can trace its history to about 1782, several years before the first official settlement in the Northwest Territory. At that time, two English-born people, James Whitaker and Elizabeth (Foulks) Whitaker, were granted 1,280 acres by the Wyandot tribe who had held the pair as captives for years. The gift from the tribe could have been ignored by the local government but, in 1830, Elizabeth was given official title, keeping it together as the Whitaker Reserve. After her death and as years went on, the land was whittled away to development. By the late 1920s, it was a series of small farms with separate owners. Then, John J. Mooney, who raised harness horses, purchased much of the original tract, consolidating the land into 480 contiguous acres, and named it Peninsular Farms. It was a working farm and horse stable for many years, but it fell into disrepair following Mooney's death. Again, there was danger of the land being broken up for development. In 1979, Don W. Miller, a businessman who lived nearby, succeeded in purchasing the land from Mooney's son and heir. He's the hero of this story.

Miller loved this land deeply, and his experiences at Peninsular Farms inspired him to become a conservationist and preservationist. After he purchased the property, he was bombarded by developers, but he refused to break it up. He was bitten by its history and beauty and began to slowly rehabilitate the old buildings. He moved into the pre-1920 home and worked steadily to restore stream banks and plant thousands of trees. When the local bald eagle population began to recover, Peninsular Farms was one of the first known nesting sites on the Sandusky River. It's also home to deer, fox, resident & migratory birds and other wildlife. The farms became a local landmark and the site of family weddings, neighborhood hayrides, and other celebrations. Occasionally, Miller allowed the Sandusky County Park District to host tours. In 2001, he took a big step and entered into a permanent conservation agreement with Black Swamp Conservancy, ensuring the preservation of the property. He wanted to make certain that Peninsular Farms would never be sold off, split up, or developed. Later, he purchased other properties surrounding Peninsular Farms to ensure their permanent protection as well.

But challenges to the farm and its preservation were not over yet. In 2014, First Energy proposed to use eminent domain to cut a swath through it to install transmission lines. The plan

called for clear-cutting a 60-foot-wide path and erecting 80-foot towers on the land. This would have broken up habitat permanently. The public rallied. Pushed by warnings of a conservation tragedy from the Millers and Black Swamp Conservancy, neighbors and friends of this special place wrote, called, and showed up at public meetings to make the case that the land should remain intact. We won. First Energy backed down and voluntarily put the line elsewhere.

In relief and as a celebration, the Miller family and the Conservancy put together a special free concert for the community by the Toledo Symphony Chamber Orchestra. It was part of the Conservancy's Simple Gifts series and was a way to show supporters the land they had helped to save, again.

Don and his wife Carolyn both passed in 2022. They are buried together on the farm they loved, near the Whitakers' final resting place, remaining part of its long and amazing history. As their heirs become the next generation to steward this special place, they are guided by the conservation restrictions Don Miller thoughtfully placed on the property and the enduring partnership between Peninsular Farms and Black Swamp Conservancy he created to promise its forever protection.





*Miller loved this land deeply, and his experiences at Peninsular Farms inspired him to become a conservationist and preservationist."*

*After he purchased the property, he was bombarded by developers, but he refused to break up the property.*



# FOX-SHANK RESTORATION/ OTSEGO DESIGN CHARRETTE

## *Learning by Doing - and by Farming, and Drawing, and Wading*

A big new classroom is being developed at Otsego Schools. It leaks a bit and can be cold in the winter but everyone is excited about it. The classroom in progress is 16 acres right across the street from the schools. The Black Swamp Conservancy is working with students and teachers at Otsego to transform the one-time farm field owned by the Fox and Shank families into a year-round living laboratory. Otsego Schools will take ownership after the restoration is complete.

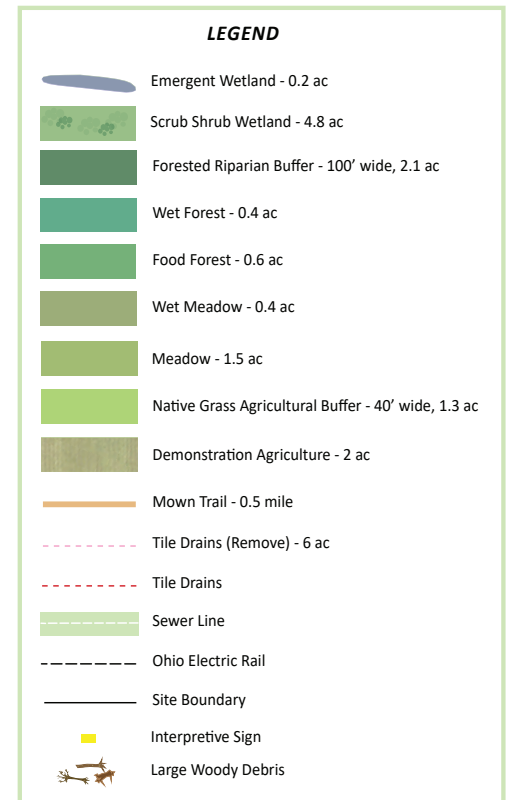
The property is going to make big changes in the way teachers can tackle different subjects. This year, seventh grade science teacher Molly Duhamel had to schedule a field trip and get a bus for one day of water quality testing. Next year, she can teach her water quality unit by walking students across the street to test water in Tontogany Creek. And they won't be limited to one day; students can measure change over seasons, see what happens the day after a storm, or monitor growth of macroinvertebrates. At the high school, a science teacher has a unit on wetlands.

His students will smell decaying leaves that provide food for fungi and habitat for amphibians. They will feel mud suck on their boots as they learn practical lessons about soil hydrology. And it's not just science teachers who are seeing the possibilities. The language arts team and fine art instructors see inspiration across the street in the beauty and changes of the natural world. Initial site plans call for a series of interpretive signs and students will be enlisted to determine themes and content and maybe help to design them. Future Farmers of America will cultivate some acreage in the field creating opportunities to see how agriculture is related to healthy soil and a healthy watershed. There's no limit to the learning potential of a living, breathing classroom.

The initial design for the land has already been improved by teacher input. For example, educators want to make sure there are a variety of habitats to explore and learn from. Sixteen acres is enough space to include wet forest, emergent wetland, scrub wetland, wet and dry meadows, and possibly a food forest of native plants.

### **Fox-Shank Living Laboratory**

Otsego School District  
Wood Country, Ohio



After the restoration professionals made their start and the teachers added their input, the students had their say. In a design charrette, the students took the topological survey and created their vision of what the site could be. With input from all parties, construction will begin this winter with some digging and dirt moving. In the spring, students will help with planting to bring their vision to life.

The development of the classroom is a unique use of Conservancy property. "We take the long view on preservation," says Black Swamp Conservancy Executive Director Rob Krain. "One way we ensure that our land stays protected forever is by inspiring young people to care about the value of natural places and systems. This partnership with the school does it all – protects the land and builds up the next generation of stewards."





*“One way we ensure that our land stays protected forever is by inspiring young people to care about the value of natural places and systems. This partnership with the school does it all - protects the land and builds up the next generation of stewards.” - Rob Krain*





BEFORE &



AFTER





# ROTARY RIVERSIDE

## *Comes to Life*

Even before the restoration is complete, wildlife is finding a home in the new wetlands of the Rotary Riverside Restoration Preserve in Henry County. After a recent rain, frogs were jumping into shallow wet depressions recently dug out. Turtles will soon sun themselves on higher hummocks and woody debris placed throughout the site. The water of the Maumee River has found access to the land is slowly exploring, starting to fill in the deep-water pool and establishing the foundation of a forested wetland. Herons, ducks, and other waterfowl have found the area and are becoming regular visitors.

As a flood-prone farm field, the Rotary Riverside Preserve used to be a flat and often muddy, monoculture of stunted crops. Before restoration, stormwater spilled on and off the property, carrying silt and agricultural runoff directly into the Maumee River and eventually to Lake Erie. Now, this land is a huge 61-acre buffer area catching and holding nutrient-rich sediment and well on its way to becoming high-quality habitat.

The property was purchased with funding from H2Ohio with the goal of reducing nutrients reaching Lake Erie. It will do that and much more. Fish experts from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) and from the Ohio State University have big plans to introduce the state endangered pirate perch to the new habitat. Kevin Nemer of ODNR said, “the pirate perch has specific needs. They want gentle oxbows with slow water flow, and lots of tree stumps and snags in vernal pools. They will find all that here.” It might take two spring seasons for the river water to find its way and to settle into the property. When the Maumee River takes full possession of the land that has been prepared for it, scientists will introduce the perch.

With earth moved and water flowing in, planting will complete the restoration. More than six thousand trees and shrubs will be planted this fall. A quick-growing cover crop has been sown to stabilize the soil. When that cover dies off this winter, native seeds are in place ready to take over. The last part of the planting will be in spring of 2023 with native plant plugs in the wetland areas.

Humans are invited to visit. The Buckeye Trail runs along the north side of the property, above the wetlands. The Conservancy will add some rocky fire rings for hikers who want to camp or rest there. In the future, there are plans to build a boardwalk over the deep-water pool. While people are welcome to observe, this land is mostly a quiet place where water and fish will rest, and sun and soil will do their job converting nutrients to waving grasses, shrubs, and reeds on the shores of the Maumee.

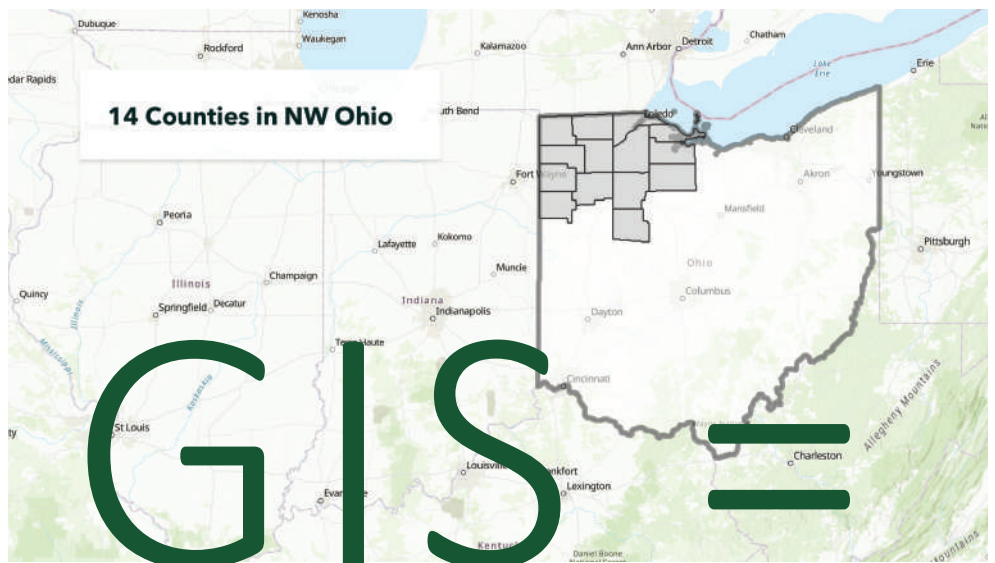
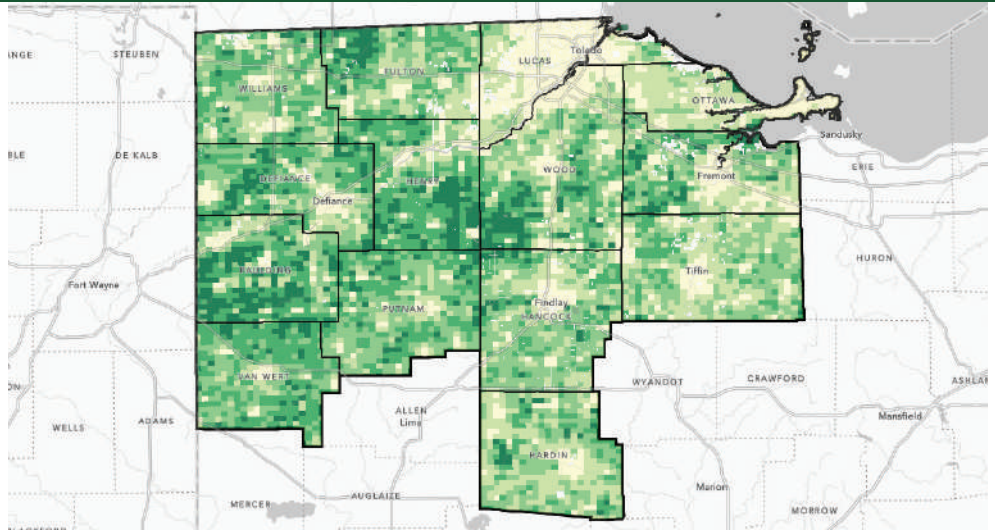


Imagine that you have 650,000 needles in a haystack. In that pile are some great needles: needles that are very valuable and make many of the other needles more valuable, too. But to find the best needles, you need to sort out every single needle and compare it to every other one. Now imagine that you have built a tool that will do that.

You are getting the picture of what a new Geographic Information System (GIS) developed by the Black Swamp Conservancy is going to do for land conservation and habitat restoration in our community. The new GIS is a multi-layered, nuanced mapping system that links data to specific locations and allows users to visualize new relationships between parcels of land.

In the span of a year, the Conservancy, working with its technical contractor, GEOACE, collected and recorded data sets that describe features of 650,000 parcels of land in our 14-county service area. We are looking at land that we may be able to put into our protection and trying to target the most valuable places. The data we collected includes information about how often a piece is flooded, whether land is currently farmed or woodland, source of water on the land, how each piece is linked to the other by water or habit, and about 30 other parameters that were separated into five categories. We can turn on and off certain layers of information to make connections between other parameters more apparent. By analyzing this data and seeing how parcels of land relate to each other, we are able to see more clearly where our restoration resources will give us the best return for our investment in improving water quality and expanding wildlife habitat


There were some surprises. Often when we walk a property, we can see that it is connected to a major waterway, or that a frequently flooded farm field is well-suited for restoration to a wetland if we sunlight the drainage tiles and move some dirt. But GIS analysis showed us some jewels that we had not had in our sights. GIS analysis might show us, for example, that if we can protect a corridor of small parcels, we will establish a stronger habitat than if we focused on one large area. Or we might get a hint of the hidden headwaters of a small stream. The GIS gives us a sophisticated scientific tool that is a great help to our boots-on-the-ground reviews.



## *Improving Property Assessment*

The Conservancy was selected by the Land Trust Alliance to receive program funding for the GIS as a Great Lakes Water Quality pilot program. MaryKay O'Donnell, midwest conservation manager for the Land Trust Alliance, said, "We recognized that the plan designed by the Black Swamp Conservancy would be valuable far beyond their incredibly important work in the western Lake Erie basin. Their GIS has learning applications that will be valuable for any group working in land restoration." One of the terms of the funding is that the Conservancy share information with other conservancies in the Midwest and across the country.

O'Donnell pointed to features of the GIS program that make possible a better response to landscape changes. She noted that Black Swamp areas which have been drained and farmed for generations might not currently show great plant diversity or habitat. But the data in the GIS indicate adaptability and restorability: places where wetlands are likely to thrive, and which will protect Lake Erie from excess nutrients by storing water and converting nutrients into native plants.

The GIS is a dynamic system. It will be kept current as new information is acquired and as data sets are updated. Conservancy Executive Director Rob Krain said, "With this information, we are prepared for the future. We are becoming even more effective and ready to take advantage of opportunities." 



# TAKING *Good Care*

Take care of your things. That's a message your mother told you. And it's one that we take seriously. People have trusted us to protect and preserve their property, to be good stewards. As we take more land into our care, we are investing more into keeping it in good condition. For some of our land, that means monitoring for invasive species and working to eradicate it. For other areas, we are welcoming guests with educational signage, walking paths, or places to rest and relax. It's all a lot of work and significant expense that comes after land purchase and initial restoration.

As the Conservancy grows in both acreage protected and in organizational scope, our stewardship activities are also growing and changing. Rather than reacting to problems, we proactively plan our protective operations. Just ten years ago our stewardship resources consisted of a hand drill, a few pairs of loppers, and a couple

GPS units operated by a part-time staffer and maybe an unpaid intern. Now we have a full-time land steward leading a paid seasonal crew of five college students. We own a small tractor, a good tool collection, backpack spray units, and plenty of safety equipment.

We're investing human and financial resources toward our growing commitment to protect and preserve. Here's some highlights of stewardship activities during the 2022 growing season. This list only touches the surface of the work done by the hard-working field team.

Stewardship work was performed at seven nature preserves: Forrest Woods Nature Preserve/Forder Bridge, Dr. Robert L. Nehls Memorial Nature Preserve, St. Joseph River Confluence Preserve, Little Auglaize Wildlife Reserve, Pat and Clint Mauk's Prairie, Fox-Shank Living Laboratory, and Water's Edge Preserve.

- 221 acres of teasel cut/mowed/treated
- 83 acres of Canada thistle and reed canary grass treated
- 107 large contractor trash bags filled with garlic mustard and dame's rocket that we pulled
- More than 25,000 tree protection tubes were removed from seedlings that were planted in 2007 and 2008
- 22 Story Book Trail posts and frames installed
- A drift fence style camera trap installed and monitored to record reptile and amphibian occurrences
- 4 picnic tables (two of which are handicapped accessible) were built





BLACK SWAMP  
CONSERVANCY  
P.O. Box 332  
Perrysburg, Ohio 43552  
419.833.1025

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERRYSBURG, OH  
PERMIT NO. 12

**Clean Water, Good Food, Wild Places**

**At Black Swamp Conservancy...**

We take direct action to permanently preserve and improve northwest Ohio's natural habitats and family farms for the benefit of current and future generations. By protecting our valuable land and water resources, we support healthy communities with strong, sustainable economies. Our work ensures that the diverse habitats of our region will be protected for future generations; and that our children and their children will forever be able to enjoy this special place.

**Board Trustees**

**Tim Schetter**, *President*  
**Will Lewis**, *Vice President*  
**Tim Minning**, *Treasurer*  
**Eric Britton**, *Secretary*

<b>Steve Bowe</b>	<b>Mary Fedderke</b>
<b>Virginia Keller</b>	<b>Brian Kennedy</b>
<b>Rachel Niemer</b>	<b>David Nunn</b>
<b>Dana Resing</b>	<b>Josh Unice</b>
<b>Karen Ranney Wolkins</b>	<b>Anne Yager</b>

**Advisory Council**

<b>Sara Jane DeHoff</b>	<b>Mary Krueger</b>
<b>Steve Pollick</b>	<b>Tom Reed</b>
<b>Deke Welles</b>	

**Conservancy Staff**

**Rob Krain**, Executive Director  
**Melanie Coulter**, Conservation Manager  
**Polly Peterson**, Conservation Associate  
**Laura Rodriguez**, Events & Education Coordinator  
**Linda Wegman**, Office Manager

*Our front cover features a green heron, photographed by Angelo Wollenbecker.*

Your support helps to protect and restore northwest Ohio's land and water resources, providing critical habitat for wildlife.



*The*  
**Rookery**

FALL 2022

or Current Resident



FIND US ONLINE AT [BlackSwamp.org](http://BlackSwamp.org)

