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FEATURED

## Land trust helps to expand Goose Pond holdings

By Carol Kugler 812-331-4359 | [ckugler@heraldt.com](mailto:ckugler@heraldt.com) 14 hrs ago



Sandhill cranes at Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area are standing in a field not much different from the 85-acre area that was just added to the state fish and wildlife area.

David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

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Another 85 acres of what is considered a keystone property has been added to Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area in Greene County with the help of Sycamore Land Trust.

"This is kind of unique," said Abby Perfetti Henkel, communications director for Sycamore Land Trust, talking about the land trust's purchase of property owned by James and Judith Main on July 7, 2016.

The couple had first approached officials with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources about purchasing their property, which they wanted to protect. Because of the quick turnaround the Mains desired, it wasn't possible for the state agency to purchase it.

"The DNR was in a bind," Henkel said. "It takes them a lot of time to get the money (for a land acquisition)."

Sycamore Land Trust was one of the groups approached by DNR officials to see if they might be able to purchase the land with the understanding that eventually the state would buy it and incorporate it into part of the fish and wildlife area. The land trust raised about \$400,000 from private individuals to purchase the land, Henkel said.

On Aug. 29, Sycamore Land Trust sold the property to the DNR at a lower price than it would have paid if it had purchased it outright, Henkel said.

The property is adjacent to the fish and wildlife area's Goose Pond 2 tract on the southeast side of the property. It includes the confluence of Beehunter Ditch and Black Creek, which are the main water sources in the Goose Pond complex.

With the land purchase, Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area now has 9,018 acres.

"That's a critical part of the property at the confluence of those creeks," said Travis Stoelting, property manager at Goose Pond.

Stoelting said it takes state agencies time to line up funding for purchasing land such as the 85 acres. "It came up for sale out of nowhere," he said. "We knew that we wanted it, but we knew we couldn't buy it that fast. ... That's where a land trust comes in handy, so they can hang on to the property so it doesn't slip away."

The advantage of having the land as part of the wildlife area instead of as a land trust is that it will be managed by the state, which has the money and manpower to ensure it achieves its maximum potential as a wildlife area, Stoelting said. The property already has an old water control structure that officials hope to replace with newer infrastructure so the water on the property can be managed more efficiently.

Most of the property is farmland, with the two creeks running through it. There's a wide strip of trees along Black Creek that Stoelting said provides a natural buffer that protects the creek and the water sources leading into the wildlife area. The land adds more upland grassland to the property, he said.

The 85 acres not only protects the water sources for the wildlife area, but also fills in some of the land along the edges of the wildlife area. The ultimate goal is to fill in the area between the Goose Pond tracts and the Beehunter tracts of land until they are all connected, Stoelting said. "We hope to fill in that gap a little bit and make sure that the property is connected in a way that benefits the wildlife," he said.

The new property is the second recent addition to the original fish and wildlife area. The other land purchase, known as the Thousand Islands area, was on the northwestern side of the fish and wildlife area. That 869-acre tract was purchased in February 2016.

In addition to the new 85-acre site, Stoelting said, future plans at Goose Pond include adding interpretive displays in the visitors center that opened last year in order to educate people about the area's history and what can be seen and done while at the wildlife area.

## About Goose Pond

Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area was purchased in 2005 by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Many different state, federal and local groups and agencies worked to acquire and restore the 8,000-acre property, work begun in 2000 when then-owner Maurice Wilder sold the conservation easement rights and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service began restoration efforts. The land had been drained for farming around the turn of the 20th century.

The property cost \$8 million to purchase, with the state paying about \$2 million, half of which came from the Indiana Heritage Trust, and the rest coming from game bird habitat stamp and duck stamp receipts and the state Fish and Wildlife Fund. Almost \$5 million of the purchase price came from federal sources, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North American Waterfowl Conservation Act and the Federal Highway Administration. The rest was paid by private donors.

Almost immediately, the wildlife area began to attract a variety of birds and wildlife that had not been seen in the area for years. Anyone visiting Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area this year may have seen a rare Hudsonian godwit, which migrates between the Arctic and southern South America, as well as the sandhill cranes, snow geese and various shorebirds and waterfowl that migrate through the area each spring and fall. Right now, there are hundreds of American white pelicans at the wildlife area, as well as egrets and great blue herons.

The visitors center opened in September 2016 and has an observation deck, large windows to view wildlife, and restrooms. Hours are 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m.-noon Saturday now through Feb. 14.