

# Large tracts near state park, river acquired by Sycamore Land Trust: [www.heraldtimesonline.com](http://www.heraldtimesonline.com)

Group buys acreage near Brown County State Park, Patoka River

By Dawn Hewitt  
331-4377 | [dhewitt@heraldt.com](mailto:dhewitt@heraldt.com)  
9/28/2012

Sycamore Land Trust is changing the landscape of Indiana, ensuring that the forests, wetlands and now-rare prairies of the state's past remain part of its future.

The Bloomington-based nonprofit announced this week that it has acquired 600 acres near Brown County State Park and 1,043 acres adjacent to the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge west of Jasper. In August, the group negotiated a conservation easement on the Capriole Goat Farm in Floyd County.

The group now protects about 7,000 acres in 26 Indiana counties, owning about 3,000 acres outright and holding easements on another 4,000.

In 2012, they've purchased nearly \$4 million worth of land.

"There was probably a time in the organization's history when buying 600 acres would have seemed impossible to imagine," said SLT Executive Director Christian Freitag. "This year, we're buying over 1,600 acres, adding 1,000 acres to a national wildlife refuge and basically adding 600 acres to the state park habitat. These are aggressive, important projects."

"Indiana will be different in 100 years because of this work," he said.

## Hare Preserve

Downey Hill, near Gnaw Bone, is one of the highest points in Brown County. The property is almost completely wooded, with steep ridges and deep ravines. The property had been owned by a group of individuals who purchased it as recreational land in the 1980s, and did not timber the land.

The land trust secured the funds to purchase the property primarily from the Dr. Laura Hare Charitable Trust. The property will be called The Hare Preserve at Back Creek.

SLT plans to manage the property to promote its healthy maturation as a mixed upland hardwood habitat, according to a news release from the group.

The property is adjacent to the 1,400 Gnaw Bone Camp, which is adjacent to Brown County State Park, Indiana's largest state park, at more than 18,000 acres. Gnaw Bone Camp's forest is protected by a permanent conservation easement established through the federal Forest Legacy Program, and now held by the state of Indiana.

The three adjacent properties form a contiguous habitat block and provide a link between Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood state forests and the Hoosier National Forest. Large uninterrupted forest blocks are critical habitat for migratory songbirds and numerous other species.

"Opportunities to add 600 acres to already protected blocks are extremely rare, and once missed, may be lost forever. This project will ensure permanent protection for a sizable parcel in one of the largest hardwood forest blocks in the Midwest," the release states.

## Columbia Mine

Columbia Mine was previously owned by Peabody Energy and connects two disjointed tracts of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge.

"It's a keystone property, bringing those parcels together," said Bill McCoy, property manager for the refuge.

It features 300 acres of natural wetlands, including marsh and bottom forests, upland woodlots and grasslands, shrub and prairie plantings and several lakes. Units of Pike State Forest and Sugar Ridge Fish and Wildlife Area also connect to the refuge, creating a contiguous habitat block of 5,000 acres, now that Columbia Mine is protected.

The South Fork of the Patoka River passes through Columbia Mine, and the main Patoka River is along its northern border. The tract also includes a portion of Snakey Point Marsh.

About 700 acres of Columbia Mine was strip mined in the 1990s, then reclaimed as diverse wildlife habitat.

The area is now home to several endangered and threatened species, including bobcat, river otter, Indiana bat, copper-bellied watersnake, cerulean warbler and Henslow's sparrow. Bald eagles have nested on the property since 2001, and McCoy said paddlefish can be spotted jumping in some of the man-made lakes on the reclaimed mine.

McCoy said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been negotiating with Peabody to purchase the property for 10 years, but they could not reach an agreement.

"We were at the end of the rope," he said. "We were going to lose it." McCoy said Peabody had begun surveying the property and plotting it out to be subdivided for sale to private owners when the land trust stepped in.

"We couldn't have done it without Sycamore Land Trust," McCoy said. "SLT made it possible to protect that property in perpetuity for fish and wildlife and recreation."

Peabody was willing to sell below fair market value. Still, the bottom line is nearly \$2 million. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will purchase a conservation easement from the land trust, giving the federal agency rights to manage the property as part of the national wildlife refuge.

Ducks Unlimited and the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust have also made generous donations to pay for the property. Much of the funding for the overall project budget has been secured, but SLT is seeking additional donors to complete the overall project cost.

"The quality of partnership this project required is remarkable," Freitag said. "A lot of people worked for years to make this happen, and that hard work paid off. Conservation groups, private industry, government agencies — all working together. We all knew how important this parcel was."

"It's been rewarding to see the land trust grow," he said. "People have shown support for both what we do and how we do it. Sounds amazing in a such a contentious time, but we just focus on solutions."

For more

Sycamore Land Trust's annual celebration and fundraising dinner is 6 p.m. Nov. 2 at the Bloomington-Monroe County Convention Center, 302 S. College Ave.

The event features drinks provided by Oliver Winery and Upland Brewing Company, dinner, a silent auction, a presentation by nature photographer Steve Gifford, and samples of goat cheese from Capriole Farm, which is now protected by Sycamore Land Trust.

Cost is \$60 per person or \$400 for a table for eight. Email [info@sycamorelandtrust.org](mailto:info@sycamorelandtrust.org), call 336-5382, Ext. 100, or visit <http://sycamorelandtrust.org> for more information, to purchase tickets or to make a donation.

**A pair of bobcats survey Columbia Mine, a thousand-acre property adjacent to the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge east of Jasper.  
Steve Gifford | Courtesy photo**



River otters like this one live in the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge east of Jasper and in the adjacent Columbia Mine property recently acquired by Sycamore Land Trust. Steve Gifford | courtesy photo



A family of river otters swims in the Columbia Mine property, a recent acquisition of Sycamore Land Trust, east of Jasper. Steve Gifford | courtesy photo



Stewart Moon | Herald-Times

## Sycamore Land Trust acquires new land

