

## Land acquisition adds over 1,000 acres to Patoka National Wildlife Refuge

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River Otter in the Patoka River. (Courtesy: Steve Gifford)



River Otters near Columbia Mine. (Courtesy: Steve Gifford)



Bobcats near Columbia Mine. (Courtesy: Steve Gifford)

OAKLAND CITY, IN (WFIE) -

In its largest land protection project yet, Sycamore Land Trust has acquired a 1,043 acre tract adjoining the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), one of only three national wildlife refuges in Indiana. The property contains marsh and forested wetlands, as well as upland tree and prairie plantings, providing diverse habitat for several endangered and threatened species such as bobcat, river otter, Indiana bat, copperbelly watersnake, and cerulean warbler.

Acquisition of this land has been a top priority for the managers of Patoka River NWR for over five years, but a deal failed to materialize. Peabody Energy ultimately agreed to sell the property to Sycamore Land Trust, who will have an agreement with the US Fish and Wildlife Service allowing the agency to manage the property as part of the refuge even though it will remain privately owned.

Sycamore Land Trust secured a private loan and purchased the property from American Land Holdings, a subsidiary of Peabody Energy. The overall project cost, including the land purchase, loan interest, and other costs, was nearly \$2 million. Various sources have committed funding to the project. The largest of these is the US Fish and Wildlife Service, who will purchase a conservation easement from Sycamore Land Trust giving them the right to manage the property as part of the national wildlife refuge.

Additional funding for the project has been provided by Ducks Unlimited and the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust, a program created to protect, in the Governor's words, "our most precious natural spaces" in celebration of the state's bicentennial in 2016. Peabody Energy agreed to sell the property below fair market value to assist with the project as well. Much of the funding for the overall project budget has been secured, and Sycamore Land Trust is seeking additional donors to complete the last 5% of the overall project budget.

The property, referred to as Columbia Mine, creates a contiguous habitat block of 5,000 acres. The South Fork of the Patoka River passes through the property and it also includes a portion of Snakey Point Marsh. Most of the wetland habitat has been identified as Core Area Habitat for the federally-threatened copperbelly watersnake. A pair of bald eagles has been nesting on the property since 2001, making them the first bald eagles to nest within the refuge acquisition area since their reintroduction to Indiana. River otters and bobcats have also been documented on the property.

Of the project, Sycamore Land Trust Executive Director Christian Freitag said, "The quality of the land is truly impressive. You don't think river otters and bobcats when you think of Indiana, but this is a prime example of 'if you build it, they will come.' Nature is pretty resilient."

He added, "And beyond that, the quality of partnership this project required is remarkable. 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."

One of the people who worked tirelessly to protect this land is Bill McCoy, manager of the Patoka River NWR for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. "For years I've seen this land just across the refuge boundaries and hoped to add it the refuge," he said. "Finally we reached out to Sycamore Land Trust and with their help, we got this project done. We truly couldn't have done it without them."

Approximately 700 acres of the Columbia Mine tract was surfaced mined in the 1990s and then reclaimed as natural wildlife habitat, with an emphasis on diversity of habitat types. Native tree, shrub, and prairie plantings were established, along with food plots, boulder piles, brush piles,

and eleven lakes. The reclamation of the Columbia Mine tract was awarded the Kenes C. Bowling National Mine Reclamation Award in 2000, in recognition of the excellence of the reclamation work.

In fitting with the mission of the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust and the National Wildlife Refuge, the land will ultimately be made open for public use and enjoyment, subject to regulations to ensure responsible public use and protect the land's conservation values.

The public is invited to Refuge Appreciation Day on Saturday October 6, 2012, hosted by the Friends of Patoka River NWR and other partners. Van tours and guided hikes offer visitors the opportunity to tour the refuge, including the new Columbia Mine property. For more information on this event, see [www.sycamorelandtrust.org/events](http://www.sycamorelandtrust.org/events).

Founded in 1990, Sycamore Land Trust is a nonprofit conservation organization that helps private landowners protect their important natural areas and family farms across 26 counties in southern Indiana. The organization has increased the number of acres it has helped protect from 500 to nearly 8,000 in the last decade. Sycamore Land Trust owns land by acquiring it through donation or purchase, or by holding conservation easements for private landowners who then continue to own and manage the land. The organization also operates an award-winning environmental education program in schools, connecting children with nature at a time when funding constraints and academic testing have forced many schools to curtail field trips and other outdoor offerings.

For more information about Sycamore Land Trust, please see <http://www.sycamorelandtrust.org/>, or call (812) 336-5382.

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