

Saving for the future

By Rebecca Townsend Special to the Hoosier Times
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The history of Sycamore Land Trust is a lesson in ecology.

Bloomington's brain trust of people placing great value on wildlands has enabled a self-sustaining web of participation and support the local community is feeding its own need for green space. The epicenter of this work continues to build from the same location where a half century ago a local professor helped to author one of the nation's most significant pieces of ecological legislation the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

Sycamore Land Trust, a nonpolitical land conservation nonprofit that turns 25 this year, is headquartered on the east side of Bloomington in a Heritage Woods home donated by Lynton Keith Caldwell, who was a catalyst in creating Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs. He and his wife, Helen, raised their children in an art-filled, mid-century home close to the intersection of Inds. 46 and 446. The Heritage Woods estate includes a 38-acre Sycamore land preserve—the first multiple-acre parcel in its system.

Caldwell, who died at 92 in 2006, pressed for a constitutional amendment to protect the environment. He once wrote, "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are all very well but cannot be achieved without the foundation of a healthy environment."

Building quality of life through green space

In its quest to boost local quality of life through the protection of Indiana's wildlands, Sycamore Land Trust has found an apolitical value amongst a thorny field of land use and environmental issues currently on the state's agenda.

This unifying principle, as laid out succinctly by Christian Freitag in the preamble to the trust's free Preserve Guide, involves people who care about the quality of life in southern Indiana.

Freitag, who earned a law degree from the IU Maurer School of Law and a doctorate from SPEA, was a student of Caldwell's. After running 10 years as an all-volunteer organization and bringing 716 acres under management, Sycamore Land Trust hired Freitag in 2000 as its first paid staff member. He continues to serve as the group's executive director.

In a recent email exchange he expounded on his hopes for the future:

"I think Sycamore Land Trust's work will literally change the course of southern Indiana's natural history, or perhaps more precisely, its natural future. Indiana will be a better and healthier place in 100 years because of this work. And it will happen because the people who live here want it to happen, and will help make it happen by supporting the work."

This commitment to wildlands as a quality-of-life issue is cited by many of Sycamore's supporters as the foundation for the group's success. The glue that allowed the \$10 membership ante kicked in by the early members back in 1990 to multiply many times over.

Green space progress grows from the grassroots

When the first group of people gathered to figure out what a local land trust might look like, Caldwell attended the meeting.

"The first order of business was: Should we do this? The fact [Caldwell] was there and encouraging helped us feel not off the edge," recalled Tom Zeller, a founding member of Sycamore Land Trust, during a recent interview at Sycamore's headquarters.

Zeller remembers the day when each of the early members chipped in \$10 to cover the group's expenses. And he remembers the terror they felt as they signed their first contract committing to purchase a 53-acre parcel. They had two years to honor the contract. Enough donations to cover the commitment came within two months.

"That was the moment we all realized we built something that was going to last," Zeller said.

Now Sycamore owns more than 4,000 acres and holds easements on around 4,000 more. In addition, the trust has been informed that 10 wills have set aside more than 2,000 acres more for Sycamore to manage.

Sycamore Land Trust now has 930 members. The group is working to grow its new Leadership Society for members contributing at least \$1,000 per year. Caldwell's daughter, Elaine Emmi, is giving tours of her childhood home to society members and Sycamore will host a 40s swing-themed gala this summer to honor its largest donors.

The trust's largest deal to date enabled the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge to protect the 1,043-acre reclaimed Columbia Mine property. The property sits adjacent to the refuge, but the federal government was unable to buy it from Peabody Energy due to liability-related language in the deed. As a private organization, Sycamore was willing and able to take ownership because it judged the risk to be minimal and acceptable, especially given the high conservation value of the land. Sycamore's insurers allowed the trust to expand its insurance at no cost. While the trust continues to own the land, it was then able to sell a conservation easement to the Patoka River NWR, giving them the ability to manage it as part of the refuge. The new property creates more than 5,000 acres of contiguous habitat.

Beanblossom Bottoms recent expansion

On Jan. 15, the Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve expanded by 28 acres when Bill and Kathleen Oliver completed a bargain sale donation of a neighboring property, just down the hill from his family's Creekbend Vineyard in the heart of Oliver Winery's local wine grape supply.

"I'm a great fan of what Sycamore is doing," Oliver said on a Jan. 16 hike along the bottoms' two-mile floating boardwalk through the undeveloped local wetland, which features one of the state's most productive eagle's nests. "To have them as neighbors ... wow! You couldn't have better."

His sons, Wesley, 15, and Gibson, 14, who have been visiting the property since they were babies, joined Oliver for the hike along with a couple Sycamore staffers.

John Lawrence, Sycamore's assistant director, observed how much had changed since the first piece of the property, the Restle Unit, was acquired in 1993, saying, "It's neat to see how much has come back on its own with the seed bank; nature can come back if given time."

Gibson also noted the property's physical changes. "Over the seasons and over the years, it's interesting to see how [Bean Blossom Bottoms] changes," he said. He remembers the property as an open field; now it's hard to see across the field.

In new plantings, the trust is favoring oaks and hickories. Species that produce the biggest nuts provide the most nutrition to resident wildlife.

The success in habitat management can be seen in the 19 endangered species or animals of special concern have been documented on the Sycamore preserves. These include the Indiana bat, short-eared owls, bald eagles and cricket frogs. Though not endangered, the bobcats and river otters making homes at the Columbia Mine property provide additional examples of species of great interest to the trusts supporters.

Bill Oliver especially likes listening to spring peepers on full moon hikes through the bottoms. "It's nearly deafening," he said, describing a sound that reverberates, modulated in pitch and intensity.

When asked about the idea of a conservation ethic, both the Oliver boys are quick to voice their support.

"I think they're doing something great," Wesley said. "I think it's important; people are losing touch with nature. It's important for people to unplug. That's what's real and important, not Facebook or Twitter."

A random sample of visitors encountered on the Beanblossom Bottoms trail system turned up local nature photographer Vern Wilkins, who was on the hunt for an early American woodcock. He said he doesn't find the numbers of rare species in other places that he does out at the bottoms.

"Oh ... so much is unique about it, Wilkins said. "Everywhere you look bottomland forest is disappearing, even on the state forests with logging; not here. I like the way [the preserves] are managed."

See below for pictures.

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Woodland Swamp

The body of water before you is an oxbow lake. It is a remnant of Beansblossom Creek that used to run through here centuries ago. Beaver activity has raised the water level, killing some trees by choking off oxygen to the roots.



Many species raise their young here, such as the Prothonotary Warbler, Wood Duck, Green Heron, Great Blue Heron, Red-headed Woodpecker, bullfrog and green frog. A group of heron nests, called a rookery, was discovered on the north side of this oxbow.



Prothonotary Warblers and Wood Ducks are secondary cavity-nesting species, meaning they nest in existing tree holes made by woodpeckers, fire or rotting limbs. Prothonotary Warblers often nest in old Downy Woodpecker holes, while Wood Ducks often use old Pileated Woodpecker holes. Both species require a nearby source of water for their preferred food.

Dragonflies take advantage of this water as a place to lay their eggs, which hatch into aquatic larvae known as nymphs. In the warm seasons, watch for female dragonflies dipping themselves onto the water surface—they are laying eggs!

Where does this water flow? From Beansblossom Creek, to the West Fork of White River, to the Wabash River, to the Mississippi River, and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico.