Land trust acquires 46 Brown Co. acres

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Fields of milkweed, a creek meandering through. Hills covered with hardwoods.

That's what you'll find at Sycamore Land Trust's newest nature preserve. Now known as the Stafford Family Preserve, the 46-acre site was donated by Jon Stafford and his family.

"They didn't want to see it developed," said Katrina Folsom, communications director for Sycamore Land Trust. "They approached us about owning it outright."

The land is adjacent to Brown County State Park and now helps create an even larger block of habitat for wildlife, Folsom said. Last weekend there were people in Brown County conducting a butterfly count, and participants counted around 100 great spangled fritillary an orange butterfly with black spots in the fields on the Stafford property. The property's woods contain oaks, hickories and maples. Wildlife there includes turtles, hawks and songbirds.

"Because it's a mixture of fields and woods with hardwood trees, it's the classic Brown County scenic area," Folsom said.

The Stafford family purchased the property in 1985 and used it primarily as a weekend getaway. Stafford, a Bloomington physician who is now retired, built a rustic cabin using hand-hewn logs from a barn on the property that dated back to at least 1857, as well as logs cut with a one-man sawmill. That part of the property, a 23-acre parcel, is still owned by the family and is not part of the new nature preserve.

"It was a place for them to be active and learn different practical skills," Folsom said, adding that family members often camped on the property. "It sounded like it was a great family atmosphere for them."

"I worked my way through school, and I think having handy skills is really important," Stafford said in a news release. "Being at the farm was part of learning handy skills. It convinced (his children) that they could do anything if they set their mind to it." For years, the family operated a Christmas tree farm in the property's bottom land fields.

Sycamore Land Trust officials plan to open the preserve to the public, but first have to find an appropriate site for a parking lot and an access road, as well as funding for the project. The current road to the property ends at the parcel retained by the Stafford family, Folsom said. A hiking trail will also be built for public use.

"We're really lucky that the family came to us with this land," Folsom said. "It's really nice, because they get to share it with all the other people who believe in land conservation."

Sycamore Land Trust has another Brown County property, the Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill, which is located on the other side of Brown County State Park. The Laura Hare preserve is one of the land trust's largest properties, with 600 acres. Sycamore Land Trust is a regional nonprofit organization that protects important natural areas in 26 southern Indiana counties. The trust has protected more than 8,400 acres of land.

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Stafford Family Preserve