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FEATURED

Sycamore Land Trust opens new preserve on Lake Monroe

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Visitors to Sycamore Land Trust's newest preserve will discover scenic views of Lake Monroe from a trail along a wooded ridge down to the water.

The 48-acre Amy Weingartner Branigin Peninsula Preserve opens to visitors Monday. An eight-vehicle parking lot is ready for hikers, bird watchers and others who want to walk through the hardwood forest.

Just north of the causeway on Lake Monroe, the preserve is a small portion of what was once Indiana University Alumni Association's Shawnee Bluffs camp, which encompassed 164 acres. The camp was sold in 2003 and was developed into residential sites. The new preserve is nestled among the residential properties on Rush Ridge Road off Ind. 446.

The land trust acquired the property in 2015 with help from funds from three families, the Bicentennial

Nature Trust, the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County and members of Sycamore Land Trust. Volunteers with the Hoosier Hikers Council built a trail of about a tenth of a mile that connects the parking lot area to an old road that travels along a ridge down to the point of a peninsula along the shore of Lake Monroe.

Although the land was acquired a year ago, getting it ready for the public to use takes time. The reasons include ensuring neighbors are comfortable with people traveling to and using the property, making sure the animals and plants that live on the land are healthy enough to sustain

human traffic and preparing trails and parking lots for public use.

"We always want to make sure we're entirely ready before we open it to the public, especially as we anticipate that this preserve will be very popular," said Abby Perfetti, communications director with Sycamore Land Trust.

Hikers on the new trail will be able to see Lake Monroe through the trees on both sides of the narrow strip of land. The trail is 1.1 miles each way, and there's 1.7 miles of lake frontage. The shoreline along the preserve is actually owned and protected by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

The other way to access the property is by boat. The preserve is just north of Cutright State Recreation Area and not far from the Charles C. Deam Wilderness portion of the Hoosier National Forest. That's one of the reasons the land trust was interested in the property: It adds more protected land adjacent to public land for wildlife, including bald eagles and songbirds that have been spotted on the property.

Perfetti said the preserve will help species of concern - from ospreys to eastern box turtles - by helping provide a more contiguous wooded area near Lake Monroe. It is already used by birds as a migratory stop, she said.

The preserve will never be developed, which will help prevent erosion and sedimentation in the lake. "Projects like this are going to keep it cleaner," Perfetti said. Eventually, there will be signs on the property to tell visitors about the flora and fauna of the area.

New signs already have been placed on the property to tell visitors to stay away from nearby residences and to also tell people where they can park - there is no parking allowed along the street - and that there is no trespassing allowed on private property. There is also no camping allowed on the preserve, and people can't stay there overnight.

"We try not to be very invasive on the properties. We'll help the property become what it used to be," Perfetti said. "This isn't an old-growth forest yet, but it will be in 200 years."

Behind the preserve name

Sycamore Land Trust's preserve is named for Amy Weingartner Branigin, who died in 2012 from complications for treatment of brain cancer. Her parents, Larry and Carol Weingartner, along with her former husband, John Branigin, and their son, Eric, contributed funds to help purchase the property. Amy's brother, Peter, also contributed toward the purchase of the property.

"She grew up living near and loving water," said Carol Weingartner, who added it was her husband's idea to help fund the purchase of land for Sycamore Land Trust as a way to honor and remember their daughter.

The Weingartners at first looked for land that had caves because Amy really enjoyed bats, and she

and her father would go caving together. %We were trying to find some property that would have bats,+ Larry said.

But there were no properties with caves that fit the land trust guidelines. Then, the property near Lake Monroe was available. After walking along the ridge near the lake, the family decided it was a good fit.

%That seemed like the perfect spot, with the water and the woods and the birds,+Carol said. %They have spotted eagles down there. Our daughter just loved raptors.+

Larry and his grandson Eric, a sophomore at Bloomington High School South, have kayaked from Cutright to the preserve. Larry was surprised at how quickly they paddled the boats across the lake to the shore. He's also been doing a lot of hiking lately and is grateful the peninsula has a nice hiking trail.

John Branigin, talking on Friday, had not yet visited the preserve, but was happy his son and father-in-law had spent time there. %Eric's mom, she loved nature,+Branigin said. %That's part of the reason we donated to the preserve.+

If you go

The Amy Weingartner Branigin Peninsula Preserve is at 7466 E. Rush Ridge Road off Ind. 446 just north of the Lake Monroe causeway. There is an eight-vehicle lot where people can park. There is no parking allowed along the street, and no overnight parking. The preserve is open from dawn until dusk.

From the parking lot, a woodchip path leads to the trailhead. The trail is 1.1 miles each way.

For more about this preserve and Sycamore Land Trust, go to sycamorelandtrust.org.