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Sycamore improves 2 area nature preserves



An eastern box turtle was photographed at Touch the Earth. (Pat Petro / Courtesy photo)

Goal is to provide consistent look, feel at 16 preserves

By Carol Kugler
The Herald-Times

Enhancements at one of Sycamore Land Trust's nature preserves is the beginning of an effort by the Bloomington-based land trust to provide more information in a consistent manner at 16 of its 50 nature preserves that stretch from north of Bloomington down to the Ohio River across various Indiana habitats.

"We want a consistent look and feel so when you drive up to a Sycamore Land Trust property, it looks the same," said Ann Conners, development director.

Touch the Earth Nature Preserve — located between Nashville and Columbus, just off Ind. 46 — was the first preserve to have the enhancements completed. There's now an eight-vehicle parking lot surrounded by a split-rail fence that opens to hiking trails, where visitors will learn more from the kiosk and other signs along the path. At Touch the Earth, the kiosk near

the parking area isn't yet complete. When it is, there will be information about the people who lived in the area before white settlers came, as well as information about the flora and fauna on the property.

Touch the Earth was once farmland that is transitioning into woods and prairie. Photographs of that transformation will be part of the display. A \$3,000 grant from Bartholomew REMC helped fund the parking area and kiosk. Another grant of \$20,000 from Cummins Corp. will help

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the land trust pay for removal of invasive plants and restoration of the natural habitat of the area. Removing invasive plants and encouraging and planting native plant species is an ongoing effort at all the land trust's preserves, Conners explained.

"Once we acquire a property, then the hard work starts," she said, explaining staff and volunteers work to remove invasive plants that may have taken over while introducing or encouraging native plants to thrive.

When possible, Sycamore Land Trust opens its nature preserves to the public, something that has become more popular since more people have turned to outdoor activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"With so many people going out into nature because of COVID, we are seeing so much more visitors on our preserves," Cotter said. "We want to make them accessible, more inviting, more educational."

Touch the Earth is preserve with a fairly flat terrain and a mowed grass path that makes it ideal for people who might have trouble negotiating



Chris Fox, land stewardship manager at Sycamore Land Trust, works on a kiosk that was being constructed to provide information about the Touch the Earth nature preserve. (Shane Gibson / Courtesy photo)

some of the other nature preserves, where there are hills, creeks and ledges to negotiate, Cotter said. The wooded areas are in the early stages of becoming a forest, with open areas and smaller trees and shrubs that provide habitat for many wildlife including some that have declining populations including the American woodcock, the eastern box turtle, the blue-winged warbler and prairie warbler.

Another Sycamore Land Trust property nearby is Tangeman Woods, located across Ind. 46 from Touch the Earth. Sycamore Land Trust staff and volunteers are building a new parking lot at Tangeman Woods for six to eight vehicles, adding a new kiosk and have plans to double the size of the current loop trail. Members of the Hoosier Hikers Council are currently working on expanding the trail, Conners said.



This is the new informational kiosk located near the parking lot at Touch the Earth. More information about the Sycamore Land Trust nature preserve will be added soon. (Rob McCrea / Courtesy photo)

More details

For more about Sycamore Land Trust, go to sycamore-landtrust.org.

The land trust has trails at 16 of its nature preserves for free public use from dawn to dusk. A free nature preserve guide can be seen or downloaded from the land trust's website.

Another grant, a challenge grant of \$20,000 from longtime Sycamore Land Trust members Alice and Rick Johnson of Columbus,

is helping fund the project. The challenge they offer is for other people to provide grants to help with land trust projects. One such grant, of \$10,000 from TC Energy, has paid for a 1-acre pollinator garden at Tangeman Woods that will be on the open area where the company's energy pipeline goes through the preserve, Conners explained.

"It's hardwood forest with creeks," she said of Tangeman Woods, adding that school groups often visit it and Touch the Earth for educational programs.

While Touch the Earth

and Tangeman Woods are easily accessible from Columbus, Nashville and even Bloomington, Conners encouraged anyone who wants to spend time outdoors to explore farther afield, taking advantage of some of the land trust's lesser known places. Eventually, the land trust staff hopes all of the preserves will have similar kiosks, parking areas and signs to provide a consistent appearance for everyone who visits.

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