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Popular Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve to reopen next weekend

By Carol Kugler The Herald-Times May 12, 2019



Chris Fox, land stewardship manager with Sycamore Land Trust, describes the work put in to tearing down the old boardwalk and building the new one Wednesday at the Sycamore Land Trust's Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve in northern Monroe County. (Chris Howell / Herald-Times)

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The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

That's the Chinese proverb that Chris Fox, land stewardship manager with Sycamore Land Trust, equates with the work he and others are close to completing at the land trust's Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve.

The popular nature preserve north of Bloomington closed to the public in July 2018 so the boardwalk could be repaired and replaced. Fox and other workers have spent most days at the preserve building a new boardwalk in the swampiest half-mile portion of the 1.5-mile loop through the preserve and repairing other portions of the boardwalk that allows visitors access to swampy, often marshy areas near Beanblossom Creek.

Fox calculates he's walked those thousand miles at the preserve while completing the project, which will officially be complete next weekend, when the nature preserve opens to the public on Saturday.

A durable, nonslip plastic decking replaced the wooden boards that originally led out from the gravel pathway into the wetlands area at the Monroe County preserve. But getting it into position wasn't an easy task.

Fox, along with volunteers, workers with Loren Wood Builders and members of the Tradesmen International, figured out how to rebuild the boardwalk as they went. There was also a crew from the Department of Corrections that helped with the first portion of the project.

Beginning at the farthest point along the trail, the work began by pulling out the wooden boards, hauling them out by hand or using wheeled carts. Then the new decking was assembled and the posts were dug deep into the ground — all in what turned out to be one of the wettest years, during all kinds of weather, from humid, hot days to frozen mornings when workers slipped on ice, or fell through into ice-cold water below.

"There was always water and mud," Fox said while showing off the nearly complete project to a group on Wednesday.

A total of 550 posts were set into the marshy, mostly water-covered ground, with workers wearing waders and often standing on ladders to reach the platform walkway. Fox engineered techniques to get equipment and material out into the wetlands. He also created ramps and turnarounds to make the trail more accessible to people with limited mobility. There are benches along the trail for people to stop and enjoy the scenery and wildlife.

That boardwalk is one of the largest in Indiana, according to John Lawrence, executive director of Sycamore Land Trust. The new surface is sturdier and less slippery than the original wooden boardwalk and provides a more accessible walkway for the thousands of people who visit the nature preserve.

Many people have been waiting to gain access at the nature preserve, and Lawrence requested that people continue to wait until Saturday, so the work will be finished in time. The final portion of the trail, along with adding a layer of crushed rock to the parking area, is still to be completed.

From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, staff and volunteers will be at the nature preserve to talk about the project and the preserve. There will be hats and two types of T-shirts, one depicting Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve, for sale that day.

“We’re kind of realizing this preserve is more special than we thought,” Lawrence said, adding that people have been asking when the preserve would reopen. While talking, Lawrence cocked his head and said he heard a prothonotary warbler, one of the migratory songbirds known to frequent the preserve.

Fox shared a special moment during the build when he saw an endangered Kirtland’s snake, one of “the coolest things I’ve seen,” he said. “We know there are quite a few here.”

Whether it’s a snake, a warbler or bald eagle, Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve will soon be open for everyone to walk along the boardwalk.

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More information

WHAT: Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve reopening celebration

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, May 18

WHERE: On North Woodall Road. For directions, go to sycamorelandtrust.org/beanblossom-bottoms/.

MORE INFO: Major funders of the boardwalk project include Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, Duke Energy Foundation, Loren Wood Builders and Oliver Winery. Other groups who help with funds to protect and restore land at the preserve include Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County, Efoymson Family Foundation, Laura Hare Charitable Trust, Namaste Foundation, Ropchan Foundation, Sam Shine Foundation, Smithville Charitable Foundation and Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust.

WHERE TO HIKE: Before the nature preserve opens, there are 16 other Sycamore Land Trust preserves open to the public, at no cost. The preserves can be found online at sycamorelandtrust.org/explore/#directory. They include:

- Dilcher-Turner Canyon Forest in Greene County
- The Cedars Preserve just outside of Bloomington
- Powell Preserve, which has an easy 1-mile trail
- Trevlac Bluffs Nature Preserve in Brown County, which has two trail options