Sycamore Land Trust

THE TWIG

THE VOLUNTEER ISSUE // SUMMER 2025

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FROM THE

BOARD CHAIR

Dear Sycamore friends,

This edition of *The Twig* celebrates Sycamore volunteers who generously devote their time and talent in support of our mission. You know who you are, and you have our most sincere thanks. Today volunteers augment and amplify Sycamore's work in so many ways. But yesterday? Volunteers *were* Sycamore!

In the late 1980s before there was a Sycamore, environmental activists including Tom Zeller and Mary Kay Rothert convened a small group of like-minded volunteers to address the need for protecting green space in the rapidly growing Bloomington area. There, the idea for a local land trust was born. The circle of interested environmentalists was soon expanded, organized, and buoyed by the rise of a nationwide land trust movement.

By 1990 the organization had a name and a newsletter to keep donors and volunteers informed. Called *The Twig* from the outset, this publication continued to be a volunteer-only effort for over 25 years. Later that same year, Sycamore Land Trust was incorporated in the state, then certified as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. It would be ten years and 500 protected acres later before this all-volunteer organization hired its first (part-time) employee in 2000. We truly stand on the shoulders of these bold, visionary volunteers.

Many of you know that John Lawrence resigned as Executive Director in late May to concentrate on personal and family health issues. Over 20 years ago, John was a Sycamore intern (aka student volunteer). He was a big supporter of the program which has blossomed in recent years under Land Stewardship Director Chris Fox's leadership. This pipeline of university students studying environmental science, ecology, climate change and sustainability increases our stewardship capacity, brings science from the classroom to the field, and enriches students' educational pursuits. Sycamore also utilizes volunteer interns in Environmental Education, Communications and the Native Plant Nursery Program.

Land Stewardship Assistant Ella Scheper, an IU grad and former nursery intern, has written a beautiful article in this issue about the wildly successful volunteer born, led and powered Native Plant Nursery Program. You'll also discover current intern and Land Stewardship Assistant Wyatt Downey's inspiring volunteer work, and read an article by Land Steward Ben Sebastian. He is one of many former Sycamore interns working in conservation, today (fortunately, with us!)

I've stepped up my own Sycamore volunteer work serving as part-time Interim Director while we search for our next leader. In that capacity, I met former Board Chair John Gallman at a Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve event and heard first-hand about volunteers who worked every weekend for years to build the original boardwalk. Last week, I met a woman who drives to all of our public properties to replenish preserve guides and collect visitor logs. Other volunteers, notably the Weisner family featured in this issue, serve as stewards for specific properties. Further south, Greg Meyer and a group of volunteers meet monthly to keep Eagle Slough in good shape, while another group maintains trails at Columbia Mine. In fact, there's a whole network of Trail Rangers and Preserve Stewards whose work is critical to our ability to maintain trail quality across Sycamore's large service area.

Sycamore has grown a lot since the all-volunteer years, as has the need for the work we do. In order to protect the land entrusted to us forever, we'll continue to rely on volunteers, young and old and everywhere in between.

Volunteers past, present and future, we salute you!

Jenny Stephens
Interim Director
Board Chair

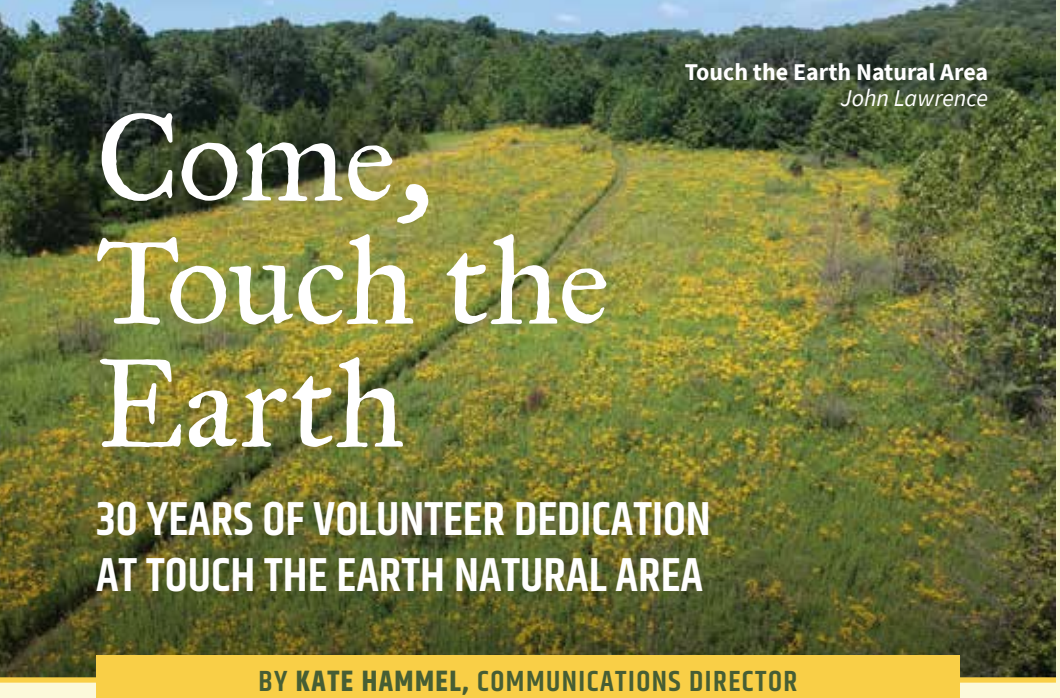
OUR MISSION

Sycamore Land Trust is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization founded in 1990 to preserve the beauty, health, and diversity of southern Indiana's natural landscape through strategic land conservation and environmental education. We now protect 146 properties totaling 11,727 acres. *EIN # 35-1830637*

Learn more at sycamorelandtrust.org

ON THE COVER

On August 27, volunteers joined Education Director Saige Sentell and Bill Daniels, volunteer co-manager of our Native Plant Nursery, to learn how to ethically harvest and clean native seeds for habitat restoration. The seeds they collected will be used for educational programming and restoration throughout our 26-county service area. *Saige Sentell*



Touch the Earth Natural Area
John Lawrence

Come, Touch the Earth

30 YEARS OF VOLUNTEER DEDICATION AT TOUCH THE EARTH NATURAL AREA

BY KATE HAMMEL, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

For thirty years, the trails at Touch the Earth Natural Area have been kept open thanks to the steady volunteer support of the Weisner family. Their house overlooking the preserve looks like a small castle built of Indiana limestone, surrounded by lovingly nurtured native plants and the butterflies they attract.

Since Touch the Earth was acquired in 1995, Kurt and Lisa Weisner and their children have been gracious caretakers of the nature preserve, mowing the paths season after season. Their generosity has helped shape Touch the Earth into a community treasure, offering a lasting refuge for nature and the surrounding community.

These trails carry forward a legacy of stewardship, helping to ensure that future generations will have the chance to walk these same paths, learning to love the land and carry forward the work of protecting it.

The story of Touch the Earth Natural Area began in 1995 with another act of generosity, when Terry and Connie Marbach made a significant donation through their Namaste Foundation to enable Sycamore Land Trust to purchase 68 acres of rolling hills west of Columbus. At the time, Sycamore was just five years old and still an all-volunteer organization. Terry recalls driving by the property, with its recently farmed fields, open grassy fields, woods, and intermittent streams, and worrying it might someday be developed. Rather than let that happen, he and Connie reached out to Sycamore and offered their help to permanently protect it, setting in motion over three decades of community care.

This would become Sycamore's fourth preserve and its first outside of Monroe County. Volunteers got to work almost immediately to bring the Marbachs' vision for the property to life. Ed Schools, the President of Sycamore Land Trust's Board of Directors, circulated a letter of introduction to neighbors sharing initial plans for signs, a small off-road parking area for the safety of visitors, and a walking trail to be used as an outdoor classroom. They also planned to complete ecosystem restoration work in the recently farmed fields. David Beery volunteered to steward the land and monitor its use, and the Weisner family, eager to be good neighbors, generously helped mow the trails and care for them.

The first official nature walk was held on August 12, 1995, with opening remarks by Terry Marbach. "When you and I are gone," he said, "Touch the Earth Natural Area will still be here, providing a place where nature can pass through its natural cycle undisturbed. An area free from the intrusion of blacktop, malls, billboards, and nightlights where the sycamore can grow untouched, the hawks can soar far and wide (hope you can see the wonderful one who lives here), the deer can graze at leisure, and the wildflowers can delight us with their blooms.

"It is our strong hope that as nature moves at its own pace in this area, the public will come to hike, birdwatch, photograph, contemplate, and study and in so doing be educated and refreshed by what it sees, hears, and smells..."

In 1996, Sycamore received a $1,000 grant from the Hazel Teegarden Foundation to build bridges and a welcome sign, with the remaining funds dedicated to stewardship. Lise Schools, working with her young daughter Molly on her back in a Snuggly carrier, designed the

Neighbors Lisa and Kurt Weisner and their family have been gracious caretakers of Touch the Earth Natural Area since it was acquired in 1995.
Photo courtesy of "She Magazine"

An ecology class at Columbus North High School visits Touch the Earth Natural Area in 2000 for its second stewardship workday.

original trail and helped to build it. On July 12, 1996, volunteers gathered for a workday to build three bridges that would enable visitors to cross into new areas of the preserve.

By early 1997, Touch the Earth had already become a haven for wildlife. Naturalist and columnist for *The Republic* Hellen Ochs, known as "The Bird Lady," described seeing more cardinals there than anywhere she had ever birded, along with a rich mix of other songbirds. She reported that Kurt and Lisa Weisner were beginning a bluebird trail, placing nest boxes to encourage cavity-nesting birds. Lisa proposed planting wildflowers on the preserve and recognized that the area was already a fall congregation site for migrating butterflies.

That same year, with help from the Indianapolis Power & Light Co., Sycamore hired a consulting forester to plant 8,300 native hardwood tree seedlings across 10.7 acres of the preserve. Twenty volunteers, including the Marbachs and the Weisners, planted an additional 800 seedlings by hand. Red oak, black gum, black walnut, green ash, and persimmon were selected to shade out invasive shrubs and restore the preserve's native forests. Soon after, generous community donors including Namaste Foundation enabled Sycamore to purchase an additional 30 acres, expanding the preserve to 98 acres. Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts built kiosks, benches, and bridges. Volunteers returned year after year for invasive plant removal workdays, removing garlic mustard and cutting back aggressive plants to give native species a chance to thrive.

Touch the Earth also became a place where citizen science can aid in the land's recovery. It is part of the Indiana Phenology Trail network, where volunteers can record the timing of leaf-out, flowering, and fruiting to help researchers track and better understand how nature is changing.

In March 2022, the Marbachs generously donated an additional 10 acres to expand the preserve to 109 acres, gifting Sycamore a thriving native wildflower meadow they had been restoring for years.

Terry remembers the thrill of finding an American woodcock nest with eggs in the grass while walking the property, proof that this preserve protects vital habitat for sensitive species.

At Touch the Earth, hikers learn about the area's unique geological history surrounded in wildflowers and butterflies and birders scan the meadows for rare species like prairie warblers that depend on its early successional forest habitat. These moments are only possible because of the trail that winds through the preserve, which was envisioned, built, and maintained by volunteers who are woven into the fabric of this preserve's history and ongoing care.

The Weisners' mower still hums across its meadows and through its emerging forests, just as it has for thirty years, ensuring that this special place remains open to all. In doing so, they embody the spirit of stewardship that defines Touch the Earth Natural Area: neighbors, friends, and volunteers working together so that everyone can step onto the trail, reconnect with the land, and touch the earth.

In 1995, Board President Ed Schools accepted a donation of the first 70 acres of land from Connie and Terry Marbach, to be named "Touch the Earth."

> "From the beginning of time until the early 1800s, this land "belonged" to no one. Now 176 years after it was first surveyed, this land once again belongs to no one. Rather, it is for the use of all. We can all watch together as nature reverts towards its natural state as it overcomes the intrusions made by man. Fortunately, there have been a limited number of such intrusions on this acreage.
>
> We hope that the example of Touch the Earth will encourage others … to work with Sycamore Land Trust to preserve such areas for the use of our and future generations.
>
> This is attributed to a gentleman named George Trevelyan: 'A man and what he loves and builds have but a day and then disappear. Nature cares not and renews the annual round untired.' Keep renewing, Mother Nature."

—TERRY MARBACH, IN OPENING REMARKS TO WELCOME THE FIRST GUIDED NATURE HIKE AT TOUCH THE EARTH NATURAL AREA ON AUGUST 12, 1995

Sam Shine Foundation Preserve *Saige Sentell*

POWERED BY VOLUNTEERS

Sycamore's Native Plant Nursery

BY ELLA SCHEPER, LAND STEWARDSHIP ASSISTANT

When I first arrived at Sycamore Land Trust in January of 2023, the native plant nursery consisted of a collection of plants resting in either a rock wall garden or a small corner of space by the garden shed. My first day in the nursery was a cold morning with the nursery's volunteer group. Despite the frosty temperatures, the volunteers worked hard at our task and chatted happily with each other the entire time. They welcomed me into their ranks, sharing their knowledge of the plants we were working with and of the birds calling out above us.

During my time working in the nursery, I have seen the addition of a fenced-in shade nursery, the expansion of the rock wall garden and the sedge corner, and the installation of several seed collection plots. I've also seen the number of plants sold at the annual native plant sale grow and dozens of new species added to our inventories. Just as the nursery itself has grown during my time here, so has my admiration for the remarkable team of volunteers that make the nursery possible.

Sycamore's Native Plant Nursery has a hard-working group of volunteers who meet once a week to help with every aspect of nursery maintenance. With each season, the group aids in a different step of the plant cultivation process. For the past two months, they have helped prepare for the annual plant sale by cleaning and labeling over three thousand plants. In the summertime, they transplant seedlings to pots, delicately handling the fragile plants and their vulnerable root systems. Each summer, several of the volunteers sign up for a watering rotation, donating about an hour out of their days once a week for the entire season. In the fall, the volunteers, led by volunteer nursery manager Bill Daniels, go out and collect native seed from various Sycamore preserves. When winter sets in, the volunteers clean, scarify, and then sow the seeds they collected into trays of soil.

In 2021, volunteers and staff celebrated potting up 7,000 native plants during the first summer of Sycamore's Native Plant Nursery. This year, we surpassed 30,000 native plants grown for habitat restoration, and counting. *Mary Welz*

The nursery volunteer group also assists Sycamore's stewardship team with restoration plantings on our preserves. Plants grown in the nursery from seeds collected on our preserves are planted right back into the ground at new restoration sites. The plants, in conjunction with other habitat restoration efforts from the stewardship team, help to restore the native plant community. Planting days in the preserves can be long and muddy occasions, but the nursery volunteers can always be counted on to show up with positive attitudes and boots to get the job done.

None of the aforementioned success of the Native Plant Nursery would have been possible without the incredible volunteer nursery manager Kate Mulligan. Kate volunteers a tremendous amount of her time to the nursery and has spent countless hours seeing to the needs of the plants and leading the volunteers in their various

The Native Plant Nursery's Spring Plant Sale in June raised over $15,000 to support the nursery and habitat restoration on Sycamore preserves. *Kirby Hammel*

Volunteer nursery co-manager Kate Mulligan and nursery intern Ella Scheper at the 2025 Spring Plant Sale. *Chris Fox*

projects. She keeps detailed inventories of each plant growing in the nursery, including their cultural requirements, seed source, and native range. Kate is always thinking about the nursery's next steps, whether that be by preparing for the next volunteer day, clearing out space for next year's plants, or planting plots on the property to ensure easy seed collection for years to come.

My time working in the nursery was spent working with Kate. She taught me to care for every aspect of the nursery, not just the plants in pots. When we put up fences, she showed me how high off the ground to make them to allow easy passage for eastern box turtles. When we watered the nursery, she also made sure the bird bath was refilled with fresh water. When we clean up the beds around the nursery in the winter, Kate makes sure to store the dead stalks of plants until springtime to avoid disturbing the insects hibernating in them. Kate brings an unmatched level of care and attention to detail when working with nature that I will always strive to emulate.

As my time with the nursery comes to a close, I look back in awe at how much progress has been made. Thanks to the efforts of our amazing volunteers, the nursery operates like a well-oiled machine, pumping out thousands of healthy native plants each year. I am so incredibly grateful for having had the opportunity to work with Kate, Bill, and the rest of the Native Plant Nursery volunteers. Their time and effort continue to support Sycamore Land Trust's restoration of native ecosystems, one plant at a time.

Volunteer nursery co-manager Bill Daniels believes in the *power of local genotypes*

A majority of the plants grown in the nursery are grown from seeds collected by our volunteers in an effort to prioritize local genotype plants. Plants that are grown from seeds collected near to where they will be later planted are considered to be of a local genotype. This means that they come from a lineage that is specially adapted to the local ecosystem and maximizes their success in the wild. Since the primary purpose of Sycamore's native plant nursery is to grow plants for our restoration projects, it is crucial that the plants thrive once we plant them in our preserves.

Nursery co-manager Bill Daniels leads this effort by locating local genotype sources for many of our target species. This is no small task. Before leading a volunteer group on a seed collection field day, Bill must first locate a source of seeds and visit the source to confirm the identity of the plants and their origins. After confirming the population, Bill also has to ensure that he takes the volunteers out during the small window of time when the seeds are ripe for harvest. Bill has also taken the lead on installing seed collection plots near the nursery, where local genotype plants are grown in the ground and their seeds can be easily harvested on site. This decreases the amount of travel time required and allows the nursery to grow a wider variety of local genotype plants.

The Future *of* Noah's Ark

USING SEEDBANKS TO PRESERVE A GENETIC SAVINGS ACCOUNT

BY BEN SEBASTIAN, LAND STEWARD

Long ago, all of us were stewards of this land, not just occupants. As a society, we had a greater harmony with nature so that by protecting ourselves, we secured nature with us. We cherished the plants that healed us, the animals that fed us, and we knew how to balance what we took with what we gave. As industrialization cut corners to streamline our necessities and desires, our coherence with nature became fragmented. Our reliance on a stable environment seemingly became arguable as humans tried to prove we no longer needed it. We can force the earth to do what we want through intensive farming practices, and we can use our man-made water filters to clear the pollution that it causes. We innovate new ways to shelter ourselves from the damage we continue to cause, and we play the victim of our own choices when technology struggles to keep up. Meanwhile, ecosystems collapse to the point that no human intervention will have the capacity to fix it. When environmental destruction and degradation outweighs restoration and resilience, what is the backup plan to ensuring ecological longevity?

The answer is seedbanks.

An article recently published in New Phytologist described a Bayesian Additive Regression Tree (BART) model that predicted that 45.1% of all flowering plants are threatened with extinction (Bachman et. al 2024). A critical ecological devolution is the destabilization of viable wild seedbanks. Climate change

Land Steward Ben Sebastian spreading native seeds collected by Native Plant Nursery volunteers.

effects are causing extreme and sporadic weather patterns that dismantle normal seed production, reducing quantity and quality of native seeds needed to sustain populations. Each passing year further reduces the gene pool, creating a downward spiral as certain species become increasingly vulnerable to extirpation. Seedbank restoration practices are mandatory for ecosystem resilience, and seedbank storage facilities can act as genetic repositories in times of turmoil (Wambugu, P. W., Nyamongo, D. O., & Kirwa, E. C. 2023).

The main goal of seedbank restoration is to reinstate the native diversity of seeds within the wild landscape, also known as the in-situ, or "on-site", seedbank. At Sycamore Land Trust, we have a Native Plant Nursery where we sow seeds harvested from local preserve populations.

These are grown in individual containers for future planting back into the environment to help restore native populations of the same genetic dynamic. This nursery would be described as an inter-situ, or "intermediate site", genebank (CPC 2019). These individuals are exposed to environmental conditions that mirror their intended habitat, but have additional maintenance to ensure survival before planting in the wild. A successful practice would be for these "plug plantings" to mature to thriving adult specimens that perform ecosystem functions and refresh the native seedbank for subsequent generations. The presence of these species solidifies the fundamentals of the ecosystem such as soil chemistry, microclimates, water availability, etc. which allows for other more sensitive species to germinate as "volunteer plants". For

Sycamore's Native Plant Nursery at Cedar Crest, our headquarters in Bloomington.
Photos by Chris Fox

example, we often transplant hydrophytic species grown in our Native Plant Nursery to act as pioneer species for our newly constructed wetlands. These species facilitate the building blocks of wetland characteristics, preparing the area to welcome a successive network of natural introductions. Ultimately, a prospering ecosystem evolves, fit with pollinators, breeding herpetology, migrating shorebirds, wildlife that find their place within the framework.

A subset of our inter-situ genebank is the establishment of seed plots within the nursery to allow sustainable seed harvesting (turning our genebank into a seedbank). A genebank becomes a seedbank if the practice prioritizes the storage of seed specifically, rather than other preservation types such as a tissue sample or clonal specimen. When a sample is relocated from the environment to be stored for long-term purposes, this becomes an ex-situ, or "off-site" genebank. Common examples of ex-situ genebanks are natural history museums, herbariums, and botanical gardens. There is not necessarily a priority for these species, or their genes, to be transplanted back into the environment, but larger facilities often have protocols for preserving genetics. One scenario is that voucher specimens are often preserved as historical records that contain enough morphological or genetic information to undeniably confirm that species was present at that location during that time period. Seedbanks extend on this practice by exploiting the natural process of seed dormancy as a genetic preservation tactic.

Seedbanks help alleviate the ethical issues of overharvesting wild seed and allow protection for specific population genetics. Consideration must ensure the bank contains a complex and formidable representation of wild population genetics for each species, prioritizing local genotypes where possible. Inbreeding or outbreeding depression could occur if one did not collect a substantial enough

Native seeds harvested for habitat restoration in the Native Plant Nursery. *John Lawrence*

Plant plugs grown in the Native Plant Nursery being planted to restore habitat at Fix-Stoelting Preserve in Monroe County. *Chris Fox*

genetic pool, and over a few generations the population can be become inviable. Seedbanks also give us an oversaturated supply of seedbank restoration resources with the ability to cross families and introduce diversifying genetics. Particular concern should be imposed in these instances to ensure there is no creation of hybrids that could cause invasive problems. There is a movement for the growth of seedbank networks to ensure widespread security of genetic localities while maintaining crossing capabilities.

Single environmental disasters can wipe out entire landscapes and their ecosystems. Seeds from an ex-situ seedbank could be deemed desirable to transplant back into the environment for restoration or research purposes. With strategic species choices, one could preserve specific plant communities that could be reintroduced into habitats that need certain ecosystem functions restored or augmented. These ex-situ storage methods should not be used to justify a lack of conservation initiatives for wild adult populations or their natural seedbanks. The Global Strategy for Plant Conservation maintains parameters to prioritize in-situ conservation while using ex-situ storage methods as a backup (Sharrock, S. 2020). Ex-situ seedbanks could be anything from a small filing cabinet with dried seeds in airtight containers, to a multi-million dollar storage facility equipped with liquid nitrogen cryopreservation techniques (Abeli et al. 2019). The current largest seedbank is the Millennium Seed Bank of Kew Gardens in Richmond, England, which consists of over 2.4 billion seeds representing almost 40,000 different species (Millennium Seed Bank Kew).

The tornado sirens are blaring. Destruction for your home is imminent. What do you do? If you have time and a window of safety, you remove relics that make that home yours. A family photo. The blanket your mother knitted. Your son's favorite stuffed animal. Seeds. You escape and find safety. Demolition wreaks havoc, leaving you to rebuild, refurbish, and restore. You return with your relics to make that home yours

once again. You put the photo back on the wall. It looks stark and awkward by itself. At first, the place might be unrecognizable. Everything is too manicured and manufactured. You can still smell the plastic that the new furniture was wrapped in. The stiff mattress is foreign to your body. The stairs lack their familiar creaks. The pencil marks on the doorframe tracking your children's growth spurts are gone, and in its place is a freshly painted bare slate free of fingerprints and smudges. The bones are there, but that feeling of home is missing.

With time, the rigidness starts to soften. The crisp edges begin to blend. This home will never be exactly what it was before, but you continue to add back what was once native. One day, you walk in the door, and it smells like home again. The wall that once held the single family photo is now a collage of relationships. Your granddaughter just reached 40 inches tall, and there is a pencil mark on the doorframe for the special occasion. The second step is starting to creak. The ecosystem that was once your home is healing. How awful it is that the disaster happened in the first place. We should do all we can to make sure it never happens again, but it is naïve to assume we have that control. Nature is inconsiderate of our plans when causing catastrophe, and we are running out of time to build Noah's Ark. Seeds can be our relics that ensure restorative resilience in a merciless world. Seedbanks safeguard these relics, and therefore protect what makes these ecologies our home.

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An oak seedling grows in the burn area a few weeks after our prescribed burn at the Laura Hare Nature Preserve at Downey Hill. *John Lawrence*

A Win for Prescribed Burns

BY KATE HAMMEL, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

In a major step forward for conservation in Indiana, a new law was signed on April 30 to expand the state's capacity for prescribed burning. The legislation establishes a certified training program through the Indiana DNR and clarifies liability protections for trained practitioners. These essential steps will make this land management tool more accessible, especially for private landowners.

For thousands of years, people have shaped the landscape through the use of fire. Prescribed burns are a vital tool for reducing invasive species, recycling nutrients, and stimulating the growth of native plants that depend on periodic fire. The controlled use of fire helps sustain healthy ecosystems like prairies, savannas, and Indiana's vital oak-hickory forests, boosting biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

Our staff team includes certified wildland firefighters with hundreds of hours of burn experience on Sycamore preserves, in collaboration with contractors like Habitat Solutions and Eco Logic LLC. Land Stewardship Director Chris Fox serves on the Board of the Indiana Prescribed Fire Council, advocating for what he calls one of the most valuable tools in his restoration toolbelt: prescribed fire. Our staff also volunteers to conduct burns on protected lands managed by partners like the Indiana Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy, recognizing that fire is a shared tool for conservation and that collaborating across property lines strengthens both ecosystems and professional expertise.

This new law reflects years of advocacy by volunteers at the Indiana Prescribed Fire Council, with key support from The Nature Conservancy, Conservation Law Center, and the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape. We're grateful for their dedication to ensure this vital restoration tool is better understood and utilized to protect Indiana's beautiful natural heritage.

SYCAMORE LAND TRUST ADDS

102 ACRES OF FORESTED HILLS

TO BEANBLOSSOM CORRIDOR

BY TOM SWINFORD, LAND PRESERVATION DIRECTOR

Sycamore Land Trust recently closed on the purchase of the Bill and Janice Young Woods, adding a high-quality upland forest to our Beanblossom Creek Conservation Area in northeast Monroe County. This property has been a Sycamore protection priority for years due to its connectivity, frontage on Beanblossom Creek, and dense woodlands. This new preserve will contribute to clean water, habitat for plants and animals, and quality of life for us all.

Beanblossom valley is an important focus area for Sycamore Land Trust due to its high concentration of wetlands, abundant forested hills, and healthy waters. This ecological mosaic contributes to the high diversity of plants and wildlife found across this classic Hoosier landscape. Many of the animals found here are of conservation concern, including declining migrant songbirds, amphibians and reptiles, bats, and insects such as the cypress firefly.

The property boasts 0.3 miles of frontage on Beanblossom Creek that quickly rises 200 feet in elevation to rugged hills of oak and hickory-mixed forests.

We applaud our partner The Conservation Fund who provided major funding for the acquisition through the Range-Wide Indiana Bat and Northern Long-Eared Bat In-Lieu Fee Program, which allows developers to pay fees to protect, restore, and manage high-priority habitat for endangered bats under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service oversight, when bat habitat is impacted by construction elsewhere.

We thank Bill and Janice Young as well as Sycamore members for their generous support. Landowners Bill and Janice Young sold their land to Sycamore for a significantly reduced price to see their dream of preservation come true. Their love for the land inspired them to reach out to Sycamore Land Trust for help in protecting their family property. The Youngs had found inspiration and calm among the tall trees while creating a lifetime of memories at places they named as “Picnic Point,” “Butt Slide Ravine” and “Geode Gully.”

Bill relates that “We bought the property with the intention of building a home and moving to the property when we retired. Time passed and we aged. We decided to stay in our home.

“Sycamore Land Trust had been in contact with us for years about acquiring our land. We were impressed with Sycamore’s work in preserving land and discussed selling our property to them. The property is now preserved as a legacy for future generations to enjoy.”

Thank you, Bill and Janice for your generosity and profound gift to future generations of woodpeckers, squirrels, box turtles, and people.

In the Beanblossom valley, Sycamore continues its work to restore wetlands that filter and store floodwaters, protect vital wildlife habitat and migration corridors, and work with neighbors and landowners in supporting conservation on their land.

Bill and Janice Young

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Wyatt Downey

Land Stewardship Assistant

Before joining us as a part-time Land Stewardship Assistant, Wyatt Downey began his work at Sycamore as a volunteer intern in October 2023. A dual master's student in Environmental Science and Public Affairs at Indiana University's O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, with a background in child advocacy and EMT certification, Wyatt is combining a strong academic foundation with hands-on field experience at Sycamore to advance conservation in southern Indiana.

Wyatt has accomplished so much in just two years of working alongside our Land Stewardship team! He helped to construct and install our new Motus radio telemetry tower at the Sam Shine Foundation Preserve in Monroe County, connecting Sycamore to a global research network tracking migratory animals to aid in their protection. He is monitoring newly-discovered populations of endangered Kirtland's snakes on our nature preserves along Beanblossom Creek through a partnership with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Fish & Wildlife. He helps survey the very rare and threatened cypress firefly at our Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve, the most northern site this species is known to occur and one of only two known locations in Indiana, and monitors populations of endangered rough green snakes at Amy Weingartner Branigin Peninsula Preserve.

An expert birder, Wyatt's ongoing point counts at our nature preserves are helping to expand our understanding of the bird species that rely on these protected areas. Point counts are a survey method where an observer records all birds seen or heard from a fixed location within a set time period, helping monitor bird populations and habitat use. At the Sam Shine Foundation Preserve, he has already recorded over 130 bird species!

He also helps monitor our bird boxes, conduct surveys to record the presence of small mammals on our preserves, review motion-triggered wildlife camera footage, and helps with various stewardship projects including tree planting, trail building and maintenance, native plant planting, invasive plant removal, and much more.

Wyatt's commitment to wildlife conservation extends beyond Sycamore. He also volunteers with the Indiana DNR to monitor secretive marsh birds and support threatened wood thrushes through the Chasing Melody Project, and volunteers with Indiana Audubon's Echoes of the Night Sky to track nocturnal bird migration.

Wyatt expects to graduate in December 2025 with a goal to lead bird conservation efforts through research, public engagement, and science-based action. He hopes to pursue a PhD in bird conservation and dreams of working with organizations like the National Audubon Society or the United States Fish & Wildlife Service, or even sharing his passion with future students as a professor. We're grateful for Wyatt's many contributions and can't wait to see what he takes on next… whether it's a PhD, fulfilling his dream of hiking the Appalachian Trail, or both!

Wyatt surveying endangered rough green snakes. *Chris Fox*

"My time spent with Sycamore has provided me with countless memories, opportunities and experiences, and skills that I will carry with me as I enter a conservation-centered career, but more importantly, Sycamore provided me with a sense of belonging and a renewed sense of purpose. For as long as I can remember, I have always held a deep love and appreciation for the natural world, but it wasn't until I entered graduate school that I decided to take a chance on turning that passion into a career. It was a nerve-racking time because while the passion was there, I had little formal, environmentally related experience, so it felt like I was starting from scratch. Nonetheless, Land Stewardship Director Chris Fox took me in as an intern in October of 2023, and from my very first moment in the field with Sycamore, I felt that I was finally in my element. Not only that, but I was surrounded by a team that shared the same passion. This team quickly developed into a family, and with their support, I began to see enormous growth in myself. The growth went beyond the skills and knowledge I was gaining by working on our various projects; Sycamore, by allowing and encouraging me to fully embrace my passion for wildlife and their habitats, helped me return to my roots and gave me the space and opportunity to thrive. I will be forever grateful for my time spent here."

Sycamore Sightings

Wilson's snipe

Sycamore's Land Stewardship Assistant and professional birder Wyatt Downey has observed over 130 bird species at the Sam Shine Foundation Preserve in Monroe County during volunteer marsh bird surveys, point counts, and other observations. This special preserve has been the focus of Sycamore's largest restoration project to date, with over 60 acres of wetland restored in 2023, 35,000 trees planted, and nearly a hundred acres of grassland established. Due largely to the variety of habitats protected, Shine is able to offer refuge to many different bird species.

Here are just a few that Wyatt has captured on camera!

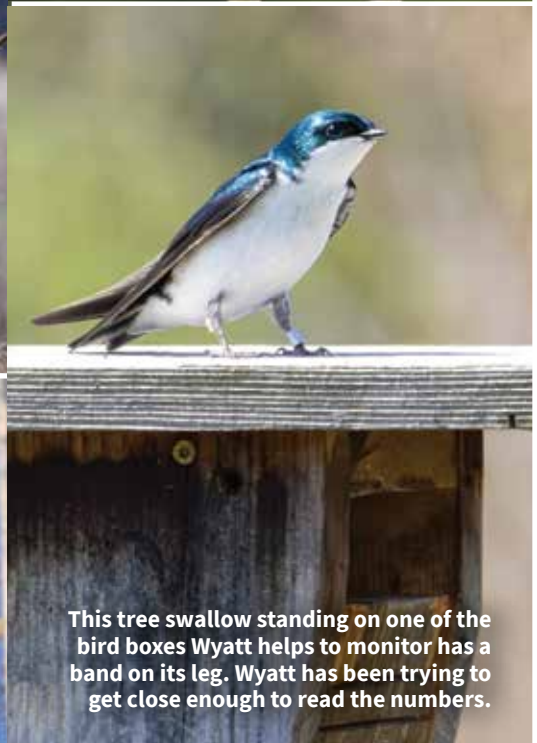
Henslow's sparrow (state endangered)

Short-eared owls (state endangered)

Blue grosbeak

Eastern meadowlark

Sora



This tree swallow standing on one of the bird boxes Wyatt helps to monitor has a band on its leg. Wyatt has been trying to get close enough to read the numbers.

"Not only are there ten species of special concern and eight state-endangered species among these observations, but populations of these species within Shine seem to be growing. For instance, during my first season working at Shine, I managed to spot one short-eared owl, and I could locate Henslow's sparrows in two localized spots with enough effort.

During this season, I have had the privilege of observing four short-eared owls, and Henslow's sparrows are now present, and quite vocal, in most areas of the bottoms. Other species of note include the American bittern, Wilson's phalarope, cerulean warbler, and northern harrier to name a few. Accounts like these show that even the most threatened species can thrive given the space and opportunity. It has been the privilege of a lifetime to grow alongside this property, and thanks to Sycamore, Shine will continue to provide for these species 'for forever.'"

—WYATT DOWNEY

Wyatt trekking the Peruvian Andes this summer.

THE TALE OF Lyra

BY WYATT DOWNEY, LAND STEWARDSHIP ASSISTANT

The Chasing Melody Project is an international effort involving several partner agencies and organizations, and it is dedicated to the study of wood thrush across their entire life cycles. During the summer of 2024, I had the pleasure of participating in this project as a volunteer alongside Sycamore Land Trust and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

My primary role was scouting areas for wood thrush activity and locating nests. If I was able to locate one, I would then report the location to Allisyn Gillet, state ornithologist with the Indiana DNR, so we could return to that spot, capture the thrush, equip them with a motus harness, and then release them unharmed.

On my first scouting trip, I set out with fellow Sycamore intern, Lindsey Levine, to search one of the ridges at the Sam Shine Foundation Preserve. It was quite early when the search began, so while my coffee had not quite kicked in yet, I was buzzing with a mix of emotions. Excitement, because I was finally in the midst of a project I had been looking forward to for months, but also a nervous anticipation because this was my first time conducting an independent survey.

Those nerves quickly melted away when I heard wood thrush singing in the distance for the first time. I heard their songs long before we were able to spot them, so we followed their melodies and slowly but surely narrowed in on the area where they were most active. Not terribly long after determining the area that must be their territory, I spotted a nest with characteristics consistent with how a wood thrush would construct one. Wood Thrush nests are bulky, cup-shaped structures built by the female using grass, leaves, and stems, which are lined with mud and rootlets. They're typically placed in the fork of a sapling or shrub in the forest understory.

"Lyra," a wood thrush tagged by Wyatt Downey as part of Indiana DNR and Indiana Audubon's Chasing Melody Project

The Sycamore stewardship team and I returned shortly after, alongside Alli's team from the DNR. I led our joint crew down the ridge, and I was filled with absolute joy when we rounded a tree to see a wood thrush sitting on the nest. The following capture and equipping of the motus harness went as smoothly as we had hoped. The thrush was a female estimated to be in her second year of life, her tail feathers were ragged most likely due to her stage of molt, and she was beautiful!

After she had been fitted with a motus harness, we released her and sent her away with hopes of a successful nesting and then migration season. Later that same day, I learned that I could adopt a wood thrush as part of a fundraiser for the project. Naturally, I had to do just that, so I went online and submitted my "adoption" paperwork and fee. I wasn't able to choose which thrush to adopt, so you can only imagine my excitement when I received the adoption certificate in the mail and discovered that the thrush I had been assigned was that very same thrush I had located!

I named her "Lyra" after the harp constellation, and I am happy to announce that not only did she survive her migratory journey, but her songs will now fill the ridge at Shine with joy for another season.

After Lyra's Motus tag and harness was fitted, she was tracked on multiple radio telemetry towers along the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, including at our Sam Shine Foundation Preserve. Through this international network of research partners, we are able to track her progress along her annual migration. When her tag #88752 registers on a tower she passes, this information helps us better understand how to protect wood thrushes across their migratory range, and better protect and restore the habitats that this sensitive species relies on. Follow her journey at Motus.org.

"I learned that her tag was last picked up at Goose Pond, which means she's either nesting there or could be at Shine without having been picked up on the tower," Wyatt said. "Sometimes they won't register if they're in a valley or too far down the ridge. I suppose the alternative is her journey may have ended at Goose Pond, but I choose to believe she survived."

UPCOMING EVENTS & VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Join us for a hike, workday, or special event! Registration is required for all hikes and workdays, sign up at sycamorelandtrust.org/events. Hikes are free for Sycamore members. The suggested donation for non-members is $5/person and $10/family. Educational volunteer workdays are always free.

Thank you to the amazing naturalists and educators who support Sycamore's diverse range of educational programming as volunteers, including Cathy Meyer, David Rupp, David Johnson, Carroll Ritter, Bill Daniels, Randy Jones, Ray Major, Jeanette Jaskula, Ben Fleet, Bailey Swan, and many others!

SEPTEMBER

GROUP HIKE: COLUMBIA MINE PRESERVE

Saturday, September 20, 9am-noon
Columbia Mine Preserve (Pike/Gibson Counties)
Explore this hidden gem of ecological richness in southwestern Indiana, winding through a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands, and bottomland forests. As we hike, we'll take time to botanize and discuss the ecological restoration that has transformed this former surface mine into a vibrant habitat, one of the state's most successful restoration sites.

NATIVE SEED COLLECTION VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Wednesday, September 24, 1-3pm
Carl Ziegler Wetlands (Monroe County)
Thursday, September 25, 1-3pm
Touch the Earth Natural Area (Bartholomew County)
Monday, September 29, 1-3pm
Powell Preserve (Monroe County)
Join Education Director Saige Sentell and Bill Daniels, volunteer co-manager of our Native Plant Nursery, for a special volunteer opportunity to learn how to ethically harvest and clean seeds for habitat restoration projects. The seeds collected will be used in educational programming throughout our 26-county service area and in future restoration projects at our preserves. *Powell Preserve and the Carl Ziegler Wetlands are not open to the public.*

OCTOBER

PRESERVE-A-PRESERVE VOLUNTEER WEED WRANGLES

Friday, October 3, 10am-noon
Powell Preserve (Monroe County)
Thursday, October 16, 10am-noon
Touch the Earth Natural Area (Bartholomew County)
Thursday, October 31, 10am-noon
Powell Preserve (Monroe County)
These educational volunteer opportunities will target invasive and native woody species to help maintain open meadows. Participants will learn how to manage open habitats safely while using the "cut stump method" with tools like handsaws and loppers. A certified applicator will apply all herbicide to the cut surfaces. *Powell Preserve is not open to the public.*

SYCAMORE LAND TRUST'S 2025 ANNUAL CELEBRATION

Saturday, October 4, 5:30pm
Monroe Convention Center (302 S College Ave, Bloomington)
Join us for an evening of good food, good company, and good conversation with fellow nature supporters, and help us celebrate another successful year of conservation and education in southern Indiana! Tickets are $85 per person, $600 to host a table of eight. Purchase tickets at sycamorelandtrust.org/annual-celebration.

OCTOBER BIG DAY BIRDING HIKE WITH WYATT DOWNEY

Saturday, October 11, 9-11am
Sam Shine Foundation Preserve (Monroe County)
Explore the restored habitats at Shine with Sycamore's Land Stewardship Assistant and expert birder Wyatt Downey and contribute your sightings to a worldwide citizen science effort to support bird conservation. This is one of 17 birding hikes across Indiana hosted by Indiana Audubon Society and the Indiana Land Protection Alliance. Tickets are $5 per person. *Sam Shine Foundation Preserve is not open to the public.*

This summer, the Indiana DNR Division of Fish & Wildlife partnered with Sycamore's Land Stewardship team to release thousands of state endangered crawfish frog tadpoles and 606 metamorph frogs (tadpoles in the process of transforming into adult frogs) in the new wetlands and adjacent restored grassland habitat at our Sam Shine Foundation Preserve in Monroe County. Crawfish frogs need three things for good habitat: grasslands, wetlands, and crayfish burrows. This preserve provides ideal habitat to support this state endangered species. *Nate Engbrecht/Indiana DNR*

Sycamore Land Trust

20 ANNUAL CELEBRATION 25

"INSPIRING A LIFELONG APPRECIATION FOR NATURE"

Join us for an evening of good food, good company, and good conversation with fellow nature supporters, and help us celebrate another successful year of conservation and education in southern Indiana!

Our Annual Celebration helps us raise funds to preserve more land, build more trails, and continue our free education programs. This year, we will highlight the 20th anniversary of our Environmental Education program and the many ways Sycamore inspires everyone to get involved in conservation.

A reception and silent auction will begin at 5:30pm. Tickets are $85 per person, $600 to host a table of eight. The deadline to purchase tickets is Sept. 22.

Purchase tickets at sycamorelandtrust.org/annual-celebration

For ticket and sponsorship questions, contact Susan Haislip Daleke at susan@sycamorelandtrust.org or 812-336-5382 ext. 100.

Students at Templeton Elementary School in Bloomington participate in Sycamore's Environmental Education Program. *Shane Gibson*

There are many ways to show your love of nature by supporting Sycamore's work

Become an annual member or a monthly sustaining member to support conservation in southern Indiana.

Sign up for our e-news at sycamorealandtrust.org/subscribe.

Donate appreciated stock, securities, your home or other property.

Create a conservation legacy by adding Sycamore as a primary or contingent beneficiary to your will, estate plan, IRA, or insurance.

Spread the word about our programs and the importance of conservation to your family and friends.

Give in honor or memory of a loved one.

Volunteer for a workday, join us for a guided hike, or attend a special event.

Give from your company or foundation or request a matching gift from your employer.

Give a gift membership, and/or make an extra donation.

Donate to name a bench, trail, preserve observation deck, or Sycamore property for you or a loved one.

A hooded merganser peeks out of its nest in the cavity of a sycamore tree at Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve in Monroe County. *Wyatt Downey*

However you choose to support Sycamore – now and in the future – thank you!

To learn more, visit sycamorelandtrust.org/give or contact Jenny Stephens, Interim Director, at (812) 336-5382 ext. 105 or jenny@sycamorelandtrust.org,

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Sycamore was founded in 1990 as an all-volunteer organization. Today, we still rely on the support of hundreds of volunteers to help us augment and amplify our work. In 2024, over 200 volunteers provided over 1,500 hours of service to Sycamore.

Thank you to our wonderful volunteers!

-THE-
GROUNDSWELL
SUMMER 2025
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