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Western Reserve Land Conservancy

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# LANDLINE

wrlandconservancy.org Winter 2023

This photo features Hach-Otis Extension. Western Reserve Land Conservancy partnered with the Audubon Society of Greater Cleveland to preserve these 80.5 acres of riparian and upland forest habitat in Lake County, Ohio. The project added to the already existing Hach-Otis Sanctuary and State Nature Preserve, doubling it in size.



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*Funding for this edition of Landline was  
generously provided by The Sandra L. and  
Dennis B. Haslinger Family Foundation*

# LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND CEO

There was a time when I could summarize our year end with two things: how many new acres did we preserve and how much money did we raise. The model was known as “bucks and acres,” and virtually every conservation organization in America defaulted to this simple and, frankly, inadequate framework. Western Reserve Land Conservancy was one of the first land trusts in the country to transcend this model when we began to focus on the people of our mission: the landowners, neighbors, communities, supporters, and donors who are all an important part of this great organization.

Here are just a few of the many things we accomplished in 2022:

With the conservation of 2,715 acres at 36 properties in 2022, the Land Conservancy has now conserved 70,350 acres at 883 properties in 28 counties. For context, 70,000 acres is an area 4,117 times larger than First Energy Stadium, the home of the Cleveland Browns, and 130% larger than the entire City of Cleveland. We collaborated with more than 40 separate counterparties in 30 different municipalities across nine major watersheds of our service area.

In 2022, Western Reserve Land Conservancy planted 254 trees at 23 different planting sites and gave away 340 more; 54% of these trees were planted in our program’s target neighborhoods, areas with little tree canopy. During these community tree plantings we were able to work with 202 volunteers for a total of over 1,082 volunteer hours. Over the next 20 years, the trees planted and given away by Western Reserve Land Conservancy in 2022 will sequester over 235,400 pounds of carbon dioxide, intercept over 1.6 million gallons of stormwater, remove over 975 pounds of toxic and dangerous air pollution, save neighborhoods thousands of dollars in fuel and electricity costs, and reduce noise pollution and the heat island effect in the City of Cleveland.

During 2022, at a variety of events including Vibrant Places hikes, Field Explorations, and our youth-oriented Nature Quest series, the Land Conservancy hosted over 550 participants at 27 in-person events. Thousands more joined virtually to hear from nationally-renowned scientific experts on a variety of nature topics during our wildly popular Biodiversity Symposium.

In 2022, we wrote and adopted a new strategic plan. One of the hallmarks of our growth and success has been a devotion to regular strategic planning coupled with a commitment to implement the plans that we adopt.

This year we continued our work with some amazing organizations: the Cleveland Tree Coalition, Khnemu Foundation, Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts, the National League of Cities, Black Environmental Leaders, the Vanguard Cities, Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, many park districts and municipalities, and many neighborhood community development corporations.

Our team has evolved into the leading authority on how to clean and green blight in the City of Cleveland. Ground Work matured this year into a significant and, I think, groundbreaking program, as did many related projects and programs.

In 2018, to support this important work and accelerate the pace of conservation, the Land Conservancy embarked on an ambitious effort to raise \$50 million in a comprehensive fundraising campaign to Conserve, Connect, & Sustain. At the end of 2022, the organization has secured \$47 million and anticipates meeting the full fundraising goal by June 30. The Conserve, Connect, & Sustain fundraising campaign will guarantee that the lands we protect today will remain protected for future generations.

By every measure - not just “bucks and acres” - 2022 was a year of success. It delights me to think what we will accomplish together in 2023 and the many, many years that will follow.

Sincerely,

Rich Cochran  
President and CEO



Photo credit: Scott Esterly

# 35 YEARS OF CONSERVATION... AND COUNTING!

**W**estern Reserve Land Conservancy was established in 2006 when seven local land trusts merged into Chagrin River Land Conservancy and then changed the organization's name to Western Reserve Land Conservancy. Three more land trusts later merged with Western Reserve Land Conservancy; one in 2009 and two more in 2012. Ask any of the folks involved in that first merger why they felt it was necessary and they all say the same thing: to elevate the pace of conservation in our region to ensure that Northeast Ohio's natural lands and resources were protected for future generations. Board members from different land trusts across our region came together, put aside their differences, and relied upon each other's strengths and experience to achieve their goal of an effective and unified land conservation organization for the region.

"We serve as a model to the rest of the nation and at state and national gatherings we are constantly asked, 'How did you manage to accomplish that?'" said Land Conservancy Trustee Kathy Leavenworth, who was the Board chair of the Chagrin River Land Conservancy during the negotiations of the merger. "I don't think any of us could have predicted that we would have such success so quickly."

The newly formed Western Reserve Land Conservancy, chaired by Jim Spira when the merger was completed, has since become one of the largest and most impactful land trusts in the country: more than 70,000 acres conserved, a robust urban green placemaking program that helped raise nearly \$1 billion for demolition of abandoned and vacant properties in Ohio, over 35,000 acres that will always remain prime Ohio farmland, and 15,000 trees planted, distributed, and maintained. When the merger was complete, the legal documents establishing the incorporation of the Chagrin River Land Conservancy, the surviving organization from the 2006 merger, were used as the legal date of when the Land Conservancy was born, in 1987. Last year we celebrated 35 years of conservation in Northeast Ohio, and are well positioned for many more.

However, the story goes back even further.

In 1985, a small group of concerned citizens saw rampant development occurring at breakneck speed in and around Russell Township in Geauga County. Forests were chopped down to

make way for new housing projects. Grass was paved with concrete and asphalt. The natural beauty of Ohio was disappearing, and fast.

"I was working for the Cleveland Metroparks in 1983 when I moved to Russell Township," said Tom Stanley, a co-founder of the Russell Land Conservancy. "Protecting more land was not one of the high priorities at that time [for the Metroparks], but that was one of my major goals as a biologist, to make sure that these lands didn't just disappear."

Stanley, together with Russell residents Dave and Martha Johnson, Lucia Nash, Paul Neidhardt, Bebe Ober, Janelle Parks, and Greg Studen, formed the Russell Land Conservancy in 1985. Their learning curve was steep - very few land trusts existed nationwide and none in our region. The nationally-based Trust for Public Land had just begun providing seed money and trainings on how to utilize conservation easements for land protection to fledgling land trusts, and the Russell residents were able to take advantage.

"It started out very small, and we had no idea that what we were doing would lead to such success all these years later. If I told you back then that I knew what it was going to become, I'd be lying," Stanley said. "We all learned from each other. And over time, more land was protected. That's what makes this so special."

Russell Land Conservancy and Chagrin River Land Conservancy merged in 1987, expanding the resource conservation focus to the entire Chagrin River watershed. The efforts of the small but effective group from Russell managed to establish six conservation easements that still remain part of Western Reserve Land Conservancy's portfolio of projects that will be stewarded in perpetuity.

A 14-acre property in Russell Township, Geauga County, was the first recorded conservation easement by the Russell Land Conservancy. Nearly 70% of the property is upland forest and the remainder is wetlands. With a tall tree canopy stretching well over 100 feet high, the property is great habitat for multiple species of songbirds and other wildlife. Now 35 years later, it still remains the first and oldest conservation easement property stewarded by Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

"The vision that groups like Russell Land Conservancy and Chagrin River Land Conservancy had to protect the lands of Northeast Ohio is the foundation of our current and future success," said Rich Cochran, president and CEO of Western Reserve Land Conservancy. "We think of our work in terms of generations. Long after all the current staff and trustees of the Land Conservancy are gone, the land we conserved will remain protected. That is a tremendous motivation for all of us."



# MEMORIALIZING A CLEVELAND ICON

by Jared Saylor

**F**or nearly 50 years, Henry's Dry Cleaners, at the corner of Kinsman and E.116th St., has been a neighborhood business, a place where locals waiting for the bus pop in to chat with owner Eric Warren and his workers, get the latest news and gossip from around the neighborhood, and connect with their community. It is a fitting location for a new mural dedicated to the life and legacy of former Land Conservancy staffer and community activist, Jacquie Gillon. Just over a year after her untimely passing, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Black Environmental Leaders, and dozens of family and friends gathered on a bright and sunny October morning to celebrate Jacquie and honor her memory.

She joined the Land Conservancy in 2014 as the manager of community engagement and diversity, the driving force behind much of the organization's work in urban areas of Cleveland that were hit hardest by the Great Recession. Jacquie attended Shaw High School and then went on to Hiram College where she graduated in 1978 with a degree in communications. She knew immediately how she could put her education and experience to work, diving into local advocacy and being appointed to the East Cleveland City Commission at just 23 years old. She went on to serve three terms on the East Cleveland City Council focusing on community development, youth, environmental policy, and safety and law enforcement.

In 2019, Jacquie told Freshwater Cleveland that, "I want to make sure that people recognize that a leader is only as important as the people who are working with them, and we endeavor to be a collective and not a hierarchy. And for African-Americans, it's particularly important. The civil rights movement was not successful because Martin Luther King was the leader. There were many leaders with him. So yes, ideally you always have that one person who convenes everyone as a focus, but we have got to come together and work collectively in Cleveland."

Accomplished Cleveland artist Antwoine Washington completed the mural, which features Jacquie wearing a brightly colored dress next to the balanced scales of justice. A white dove flies majestically overhead as healthy rains water a green garden of daisies.

"Jacquie was a team member who was very near and dear to our hearts," said Khalid Ali, urban greenspace coordinator at the Land Conservancy. "She focused her passion and efforts right here in her community, she was always there to answer the call for anyone courageous and ready to make a change. She left a legacy that will live on and influence me and many of us each and every day."



Photo credit: Bob Perkoski



# OUT AND ABOUT



## Conservation Celebration

Memorable moments, glowing comments, laughter, tasty food, and a warm summer night all graced the Land Conservancy's annual Conservation Celebration held on the grounds of the Moreland Hills Conservation Center last June.

Incoming Board Chairman Craig O. White led the celebration of retiring Board Chairman Mitchell Schneider, who was recognized and thanked for his years of service and leadership to the Land Conservancy during a time of tremendous success and growth. He also was the surprise recipient of this year's Sugar Maple Award, the Land Conservancy's highest honor given annually to an exceptional leader and conservationist.

Additionally, Gayle and Linda Gifford and Darrell Kendall and Dawn Fleming-Kendall received the 2022 Grimm Family Conservation Medal. This award is given annually to outstanding conservationists who have preserved land in a charitable manner and view it as a precious resource rather than a commodity. *(Madison Shaheen)*



◀ From left to right, Gayle & Linda Gifford, Darrell Kendall and Dawn Fleming-Kendall

▼ Mitchell Schneider and Craig White



## Vermilion Main Street Beach

Western Reserve Land Conservancy joined the City of Vermilion to celebrate the grand opening of a new comfort station at Vermilion's Main Street Beach, part of a comprehensive plan to upgrade and revitalize the beach and provide greater access to our region's greatest asset: Lake Erie.

Public access to Lake Erie is in short supply. According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, only about 20 percent of Lake Erie shoreline is publicly accessible. Vermilion's beachfront is a treasure for the entire community.

Since 2006, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, the City of Vermilion, the Vermilion Parks and Recreation Department, and dozens of public and private supporters have been transforming Main Street Beach. Phase I involved acquisition and demolition of the vacant Wakefield Mansion and Inland Seas Museum and two private homes along the shore, adding protections to the land to ensure it will remain a public park for future generations. Phase II involved the construction of the comfort station, and Phase III will focus on creating a passive park and improving beach access, all in time for the 2023 beach season. *(Jared Saylor)*

## Nature Education

In November, we concluded a very successful year of virtual environmental education programming aimed to engage the public near and far on a variety of nature-related topics. Our popular Zoom into Nature series featured topics such as Chimney Swift conservation, basic tree identification, and orchids of Ohio. Our Conservation Awareness series strives to raise awareness on topics that affect our environment and the communities where we live, allowing us to be better stewards in protecting and preserving our natural resources. We also offered the very popular Inviting Biodiversity into Our Gardens Virtual Symposium last winter. Each of its five sessions attracted 1,000 registrants with an average of 400 live viewers. The YouTube recordings of each session have exceeded 2,000 views! This virtual series returned on January 11, 2023, with another five-part series devoted to gardening with a purpose—promoting vibrant, ecologically valuable home gardens that benefit pollinators and other wildlife. *(Madison Shaheen)*



## Shiverick Closing Celebration

This year, Western Reserve Land Conservancy celebrated the finalization of a complex conservation project called Shiverick Preserve. This project located in the Chagrin River Valley involved multiple landowners, state and federal funding sources, individual donors, and thousands of hours of staff time. The historic property is a natural oasis consisting of high-quality habitat including forested uplands with hemlock ravines, high-quality wetlands, and over two miles of cold water streams that flow into the Chagrin River, all tucked inside this thriving suburban community. Protecting this land and the natural resources it contains from future development is a conservation victory for the entire Chagrin River Valley and neighboring communities. We held an intimate Closing Celebration on a beautiful fall day at the property with staff who worked on the project and landowners of the property past and present. *(Madison Shaheen)*



## Stewards Event

Western Reserve Land Conservancy Trustee Jim Spira and his wife Myrna were honored at the 2022 Stewards Event with the Art of Caring Award, our organization's tribute to a White Oak Legacy Society - our organization's planned giving group - individual or family who exemplifies the art of caring through their leadership, passion, and vision. Like other Western Reserve Land Conservancy landowners, the Spiras established a conservation easement on a 120-acre property in Geauga County, home to the headwaters of Silver Creek, which empties into the Chagrin River, to preserve.

"From a young age, I knew how important it was to protect and preserve nature," Jim said. "What nature provides for us, a nourishment of our souls, a connection to our environment and each other, is something very special. We are all stewards of our environment. When that environment is healthy, the people and communities in that environment are healthy too." *(Jared Saylor)*



◀ City of Cleveland Mayor Justin M. Bibb

▶ Matt Zone, Western Reserve Land Conservancy Senior Vice President

## Cleveland Property Survey

Western Reserve Land Conservancy and the City of Cleveland hosted a press conference in Slavic Village to announce a partnership to survey, assess, and analyze nearly 170,000 land parcels in and around the city. The results of this project will provide important data that will assist in identifying and prioritizing properties for rehabilitation, lead abatement, code violations, demolition, and other pressing needs.

In teams of two, 30 surveyors from the City of Cleveland will be trained to use mobile devices to inventory each property. Surveyors will visually inspect properties to determine if a structure exists on the property, if that structure is occupied or vacant and/or abandoned, and then assess the property on a grading scale. They will also take photos of each property, gather information about illegal dumping, sidewalk and tree conditions, and ADA accessibility and record all this information on their mobile devices using a proprietary software system.

"With this property survey, we will soon have the data from surveyors who are on the ground, in the streets, identifying where the City can direct its resources to make a difference for neighbors and their communities," said Cleveland Mayor Justin M. Bibb. *(Jared Saylor)*

# RENEWAL ON ROSEHILL AVENUE:

## How One Cleveland Resident is Promoting Resilience and Urban Land Stewardship



by Ellen Matlock

A cheery red house with a neatly manicured lawn in the Buckeye-Woodhill Neighborhood of Cleveland's east side is surrounded by mature oak trees and a large front porch. For more than 50 years, Robert Primm has lived in this home and built a life where he raised two sons and worked for 30 years at LTV Steel. A white picket fence holds potted petunias. A large screened-in gazebo in the back provides a gathering space for conversation when company comes around or neighbors drop by to say hello. "Not everyone has to have the same idea about what makes a property nice," said Primm. "But we can all look to improve the community and work things out together, face to face."

Primm is part of a growing movement among Cleveland homeowners who weathered the housing crisis and stayed in their communities. Cleveland was hit hard by foreclosures and subprime lending; many residents, unable to afford the rising costs of their mortgages against the dropping value of their properties, simply abandoned their homes. Statewide, it is estimated that 100,000 vacant and abandoned structures exist, with at least 12,000 in Cleveland alone. For those who stayed, the vacant properties lowered their home values even further, attracted criminal activities and illegal dumping, and became a manifestation of urban blight and decay. In neighborhoods like Buckeye-Woodhill, Mt. Pleasant, and Kinsman – predominantly Black and historically redlined neighborhoods – these abandoned properties were a constant reminder of a neglected community.

Yet Primm and many others were able to find a silver lining



in the midst of these challenges, and convert liabilities into neighborhood assets. Primm took advantage of a program to acquire the vacant land next to his home to create a huge side yard, nearly doubling the size of his property, and turning blight into beauty.

His motivations were simple: make the street look better, make residents feel safer, and provide a place for neighbors to connect.

"I wanted to give people the idea that if you want things to look

good, you've got to keep up with the maintenance," he said. "Don't let things go too far in the wrong direction."

In 2008, Western Reserve Land Conservancy began to create a network of county land banks across Ohio that were able to identify and rehabilitate or demolish thousands of vacant and abandoned homes statewide. What started in Cuyahoga County has been repeated in 55 other counties statewide. Now, the Land Conservancy



is taking the next step in urban revitalization and deploying a host of strategies to bring new life to vacant land.

Since 2014, the Land Conservancy's Side Yard Program has been one such strategy, assisting Cleveland residents with acquiring and greening side yards near their homes. In coordination with the Cuyahoga Land Bank and the City of Cleveland Land Reutilization Program, the Land Conservancy identifies vacant lots, connects with neighbors and residents to gauge any interest in acquiring the property, then works with all parties to make it happen. Land Conservancy staff partner with local landscape contractors to turn the vacant lots into vibrant green spaces, and engages with the community to inform eligible residents about the program and offer support. So far, the Land Conservancy has helped more than 130 Cleveland homeowners to acquire and revitalize side yards.

“For more than a decade, Western Reserve Land Conservancy has taken a holistic approach to conservation, realizing that we needed vibrant and

healthy cities in order to keep our remaining forests, wetlands, and farms undeveloped,” said Khalid Ali, Urban Greenspace Coordinator at Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “We saw these abandoned properties as an opportunity for improved community engagement, health, and welfare. Where a grouping of vacant and decrepit houses sat unused along a street, a small pocket park could take their place. A single vacant house could become a side yard for an existing neighbor. Our innovative and holistic approach that included community and neighborhood engagement was ambitious. But we knew it could be done.”

As more vacant lots appeared on his street, Primm took on the responsibility of cutting grass and maintaining unattended lawns. He established the Rosehill Avenue Block Club, an informal group of neighbors who gather to discuss community needs, maintenance opportunities, and shared experiences. Like many side-yard program participants, when he finalized acquisition of the side yard for his home, he's often asked by his neighbors how they can also

take advantage of the program. He hands out Ali's contact information and suggests they give him a call.

“I've stayed here because I've become attached to this house, this street,” said Primm. “I've never had a real problem here. And I've never been a person to run from things. No place is perfect. Let's do what we have to do to straighten it out.”

### Applying Multiple Strategies for Vacant Land Renewal in Urban Areas

At Western Reserve Land Conservancy we work on a block by block level, creating low-maintenance, high-impact interventions that invite everyone to connect and contribute to the health of their habitat. “We believe these are the small, scalable solutions needed to address complex urban problems,” said Matt Zone, Senior Vice President at Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “Looking towards 2030, our urban restoration work is even more critical. While we have removed toxicity from our cities through demolition and blight mitigation activities, we have only just begun to supply neighborhoods with the nutrients they need to become safe and welcoming once more. Much work remains to make our region's cities healthier and safer, and return happiness and prosperity to previously disenfranchised communities.”

**Parks:** Public parks are important community assets, making neighborhoods vibrant and desirable by offering spaces for community gathering, outdoor recreation, and personal relaxation and renewal. By creating more opportunities for people in urban



environments to experience nature, we hope to enhance the health and wellness of these communities while also realizing benefits like cleaner air and water, cooler city temperatures, protected wildlife habitat, reduced violence and crime, increased property values, and improved climate resiliency.

**Trees:** Trees are a vital resource in urban areas, cooling heat islands, removing pollutants from the air, improving public health and safety, and boosting property values. Western Reserve Land Conservancy's leadership of the Cleveland Tree Coalition and continued implementation of our Reforest Our City program has helped to plant and distribute more than 15,000 trees within the City of Cleveland. We are dedicated to restoring Cleveland's tree canopy to a healthy and robust 30 percent of coverage by 2040. This will require the continued investment of public and private partners and

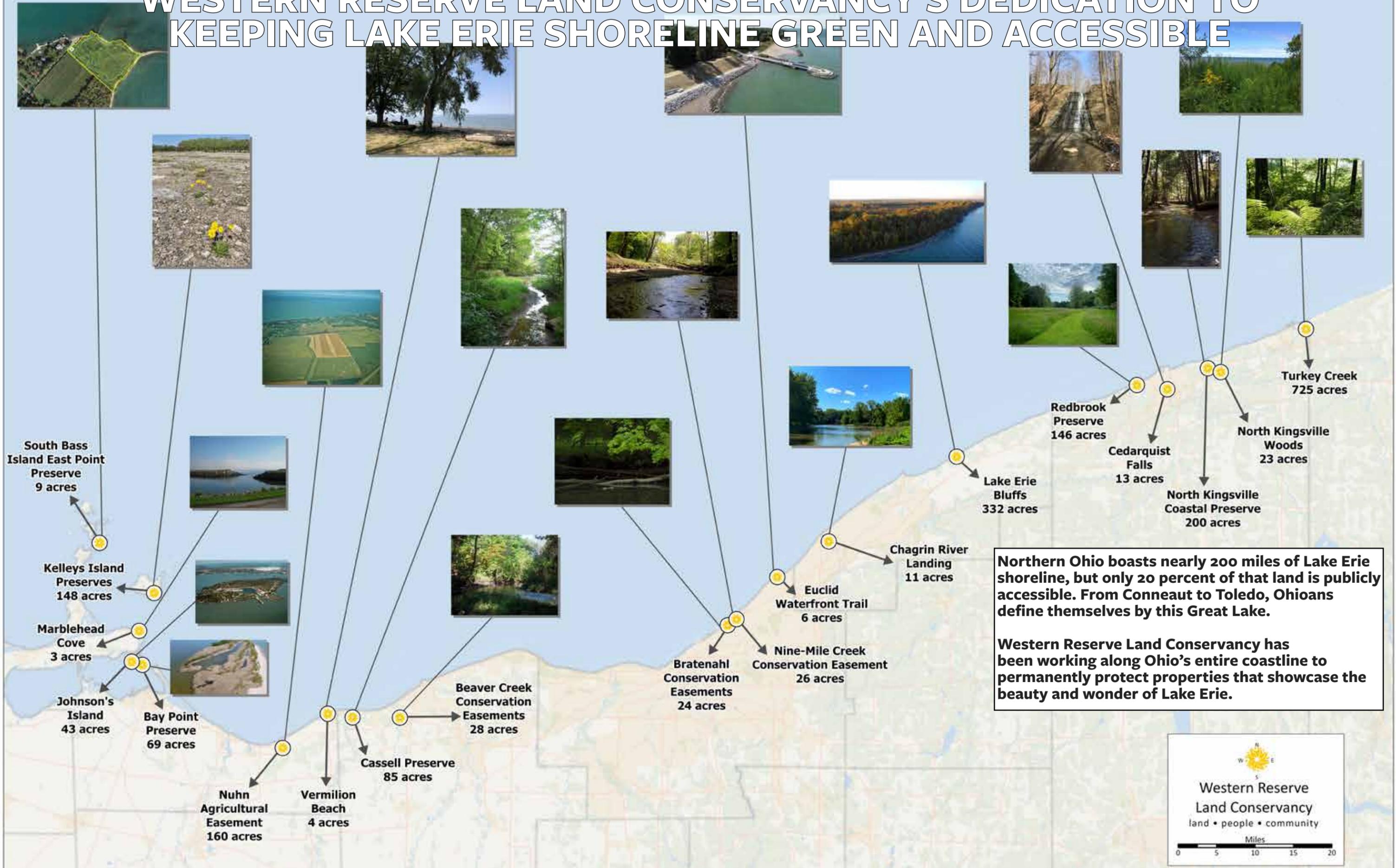
significant resident engagement to be successful. Fortunately, the Land Conservancy has a dedicated group of volunteer neighborhood tree stewards committed to watering and maintaining of new and existing trees, with more passionate neighborhood advocates continuing to join our ranks.

**Ground Work:** This strategy has tremendous scaling potential to address urban vacancy issues as neighborhoods rebuild. Cities across the state have thousands of vacant lots where blight removal has occurred. These vacant lots become sites for dumping, litter, and other illegal activities, degrading the quality of life for residents and lowering property values for neighbors. Vacant lots also pose issues to health - residents are not likely to be outside for walking and exercise if they do not feel safe. Ground Work offers a solution: installing trees, native plants, seating, and

other assets to re-green the vacant land for public use. In addition to improving the aesthetics of the sites as well as safety and community pride, Ground Work also provides ecological benefits.

Most importantly, Ground Work installations and tree plantings inspire Clevelanders to believe in their city once more. Arnita Bates, resident of Union-Miles for the last 48 years, described the conversion of Jack Rabbit Hill from a former illegal construction landfill into a Ground Work site with 100 trees as a “huge blessing.” She continued, “For one thing, it is beautiful. It added a lot to our street. It will stop a lot of dumping of garbage, like old mattresses and tires. And I finally have a park that I can walk to. It might even change some of my neighbors' minds who were talking about moving away from the neighborhood and inspire everyone to improve their own properties. It is a very good sight for sore eyes.”

# WESTERN RESERVE LAND CONSERVANCY'S DEDICATION TO KEEPING LAKE ERIE SHORELINE GREEN AND ACCESSIBLE



## TREE PLANTING PARTNER HELPS TO REFOREST OUR CITY

Over the past year, The Davey Tree Expert Company, a leading provider of tree care and landscaping services, has made a significant impact on our community as Western Reserve Land Conservancy's Tree Planting Partner. Through this partnership, Davey Tree has provided valuable financial support for our Reforest Our City program, which helps to maintain and improve the health and beauty of the trees in our community. Their support has enabled us to plant new trees, care for existing ones, and educate the public about the importance of a healthy urban forest.

In addition to their financial contributions, Davey Tree has also made a meaningful impact through their volunteer efforts. The company has provided a team of dedicated and skilled volunteers who worked alongside our staff to plant trees throughout the City of Cleveland. In 2022, Davey's Green Leaders helped plant 155 trees in neighborhoods with the greatest need for trees. The partnership with Davey Tree is a prime example of how corporate sponsorships can have a positive impact in the community.

We are incredibly grateful for Davey Tree's support and look forward to continuing our partnership in the future. Thanks to their generosity and volunteer efforts, our community will continue to thrive and flourish for years to come.



## EARTH DAY 2022 WAS ONE FOR THE BOOKS... THE GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS!

by Madison Shaheen



Volunteers with the Cleveland Browns, White Claw, the City and Port Authority of Eastlake, Ohio, Chagrin River Watershed Partners, Holden Arboretum, WKYC Channel 3, and Western Reserve Land Conservancy gathered at Chagrin River Landing early on Earth Day 2022 to accomplish two goals: plant trees and set a Guinness World Record.

Chagrin River Landing is an 11-acre property located along the bank of the Chagrin River. The property, formerly operated as a private commercial marina, serves as a public destination point and connector piece for the Chagrin River corridor and Lake Erie trail plan in Western Lake County. It provides the missing linkage between Chagrin River Park - Lake Metroparks' most visited park - and the City of Eastlake's Erie Road Park and Woodland Parks. The property is open for public recreation and enjoyment, providing world-class steelhead fishing along the Chagrin River shoreline. So far the groups involved have demolished a dilapidated home, removed abandoned watercraft, planted dozens of trees and shrubs and removed invasive species. Future improvement plans for the property include a parking area,

walking trails, expanded fishing access, and planting native trees and wildflowers.

Our 74 volunteers joined 725 other volunteers from Texas, Michigan, Virginia, and California at 7 a.m. local time with watering cans in hand. During a live broadcast on NBC's *The Today Show*, representatives from Guinness World Records and Today Show hosts Savannah Guthrie, Craig Melvin and Jenna Bush Hager told all the participating groups to begin watering hundreds of trees, plants, and shrubs for 20 seconds, setting a new Guinness World Record for **Most People Watering Plants Simultaneously**. Our volunteers were featured in the broadcast and Western Reserve Land Conservancy got a shout out from Guthrie. The volunteers at Eastlake then joined our Tree Planting Partner, The Davey Tree Expert Company, in planting 80 trees and shrubs on the property. Adding vegetation to this area along the river provides many ecological benefits, such as preventing soil erosion, improving water quality, and providing shade and shelter for wildlife, which will positively impact the Chagrin River and Lake Erie.

# ROC IN CLE

## REFOREST OUR CITY

FEATURING

# LYNYRD SKYNYRD

WITH SPECIAL GUEST BROTHER TROUBLE

May 20, 2023  
Jacobs Pavilion

All proceeds of this benefit concert support Western Reserve Land Conservancy and our mission to create healthy greenspaces by planting and maintaining trees, protecting natural landscapes, and preserving family farms throughout Northeast Ohio.



Scan the QR code with your smart phone or go to [wrlandconservancy.org/rocincle](http://wrlandconservancy.org/rocincle) for more info or to purchase your ticket!



# HOW AN OHIO EPA PROGRAM ADVANCES CONSERVATION *by Karen Koch*

There's a familiar acronym among Western Reserve Land Conservancy staff that is a critical part of our conservation success: WRRSP.

The Water Resource Restoration Sponsor Program, created by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency more than 20 years ago, has recently supported five major projects by the Land Conservancy that permanently protect nearly a thousand acres of high-quality wetlands, clean water resources, and unique wildlife habitat across Northeast Ohio.

"This Ohio-based program is critical to funding important water and wetland restoration projects," said Chris Szell, Director of Conservation Project Management at the Land Conservancy. "In 2022, one Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District loan of \$200 million for construction of an underground water storage tunnel allowed the sewer district to sponsor 10 WRRSP projects – five of which were Land Conservancy projects."

## How WRRSP Works

When a local municipality like a city or town is looking to upgrade or improve its wastewater treatment facilities, it can qualify for low-interest rate loans backed by state and federal governments. The Ohio EPA created the Water Pollution Control Loan Fund (WPCLF) to administer these loans. According to the Ohio EPA, "The goal of the WRRSP is to counter the loss of ecological function and biological diversity that jeopardize the health of Ohio's water resources. To achieve this goal, WRRSP provides funding for projects that specifically target the protection and restoration of high-quality streams and wetlands." Funds are generated by advancing

interest to be repaid on below-market rate loans taken by Ohio municipalities to plan, design, and construct wastewater infrastructure projects to WRRSP project implementers.

Each year a number of the municipalities participating in the WPCLF voluntarily become WRRSP project sponsors and enter into a formal agreement with an organization like Western Reserve Land Conservancy, a fully vetted WRRSP project implementer, which proposes to fully protect or restore valuable state water resources. As part of their formal loan agreement with Ohio EPA, sponsors help ensure that WRRSP projects are implemented as agreed while supplying the funds to implement the project.

Potential implementers are eligible to submit WRRSP nominations every year; potential sponsors are identified from the proposed WPCLF projects list released each December. The following year, WRRSP implementers must provide a management and restoration plan and environmental covenant to Ohio EPA, and partner with a project sponsor. After all program requirements have been met, WRRSP projects are awarded along with their sponsoring loan, usually during the second year following nomination. Steve Malone, manager of WRRSP for the Ohio EPA, explained the program was devised to be a creative way to help finance improvements to Ohio's water quality through protection and restoration projects.

"While we already had lots of money for much needed municipal projects from our state revolving fund program we wondered if we could create a loan program or funding mechanism to also help pay for deserving surface water quality

projects in our state. WRRSP was the result," Malone said. "The U.S. EPA now encourages other states to consider adopting a similar funding mechanism and to reach out to our Ohio staff for guidance. Ohio's WRRSP is now one of the largest such programs in the country."

Approximately \$240 million has been allocated by the Ohio EPA since 2000 for WRRSP projects across the state. Among many past Northeast Ohio projects completed were major dam removals in Kent, Cuyahoga Falls, Munroe Falls, and the Mahoning River Valley. During the first half of 2022 alone, WRRSP projects have protected an estimated 800 acres of wetlands and 70,600 linear feet of streams, while restoring 180 acres of wetland and 58,450 linear feet of streams statewide.

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS) was the WRRSP sponsor for five of the Land Conservancy's projects. NEORS took out a below-market rate loan of \$200 million from the Ohio EPA to complete a major water infrastructure project and agreed to partner with the Land Conservancy on five separate projects that qualify under the WRRSP program. Interest repayments on the loan supported the WRRSP awards to the Land Conservancy to help fund each of the five conservation projects.

"These five projects received major WRRSP funding over the course of several years. We greatly appreciate our partnership with Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS). Without them, we could not complete these critically important conservation projects, and we look forward to working with them in the future," Szell added.



## ▲ Black Fork Preserve at Charles Mills in Mifflin Township, Richland County 480 acres protected within the Muskingum watershed

The Land Conservancy submitted a WRRSP application in August 2018 to Ohio EPA; conservation restrictions were recorded, April 7, 2022. Additional grant funds leveraged for property protection were provided by the Conservation Fund and Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District

The glaciated northern half of this property falls within a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) 100-year floodplain. It includes 3,350 linear feet of the highest-quality primary headwater streams supporting a variety of plant and animal species and 155 acres of wetlands comprised of forested emergent marsh, scrub-shrub, and open water. "By protecting these headwater streams, we're setting up rivers and lakes further downstream with a better chance of being a healthy and vibrant ecosystem," Szell said. Cleaner headwaters will also provide valuable habitat for migratory birds, including approximately 60 species listed as a conservation priority by several conservation agencies. The Indiana bat, a state and federally endangered species, and federally threatened Northern long-eared bat have also been found here.

The Black Fork Preserve adds another 12 percent of landholdings to a nearly 4,120-acre corridor of protected lands including lands owned by Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District, Ashland County Park District, and Ashland University.



## ◀ Farmington Forested Wetland Expansion in Trumbull County 185 acres protected within the Grand River watershed

The Land Conservancy submitted a WRRSP application in August 2018 to Ohio EPA; conservation restrictions were recorded, April 26, 2022. Additional grant funds leveraged for property protection were provided by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA).

This property contains high-quality forest providing habitat for diverse wildlife and shade cover for 1,030 -linear feet of a cool water Class III stream (defined by the Ohio EPA as "primary headwater streams that support a cool water biologic community") that flows to Swine Creek and the State Wild and Scenic Grand River.

A high-quality 55-acre wetland complex is also located here, noted for its size, diversity, and unaltered state compared to other similar wetlands in Trumbull and Geauga Counties. An additional 12 acres of wetlands will be created through restoration to increase its filtration capacity, resulting in improved water quality within the Upper Grand River Watershed. Its protection expands a conservation corridor, as it borders a proposed bike/hike trail to the north. It is also located near two private properties protected by the Land Conservancy: the Grand River Wildlife Area, and the Swine Creek Reservation.

► **Bridge Creek Wetlands in Geauga County**  
**76 acres protected within the Upper Cuyahoga River watershed**

*The Land Conservancy submitted a WRRSP application in August 2019 to Ohio EPA; conservation restrictions were recorded June 30, 2022. Additional grant funds leveraged for property protection were provided by NAWCA.*

This property includes mature forest and approximately 47 acres of high-quality wetlands within the Upper Cuyahoga River Watershed, one of the largest and highest-quality wetland complexes remaining in Ohio.

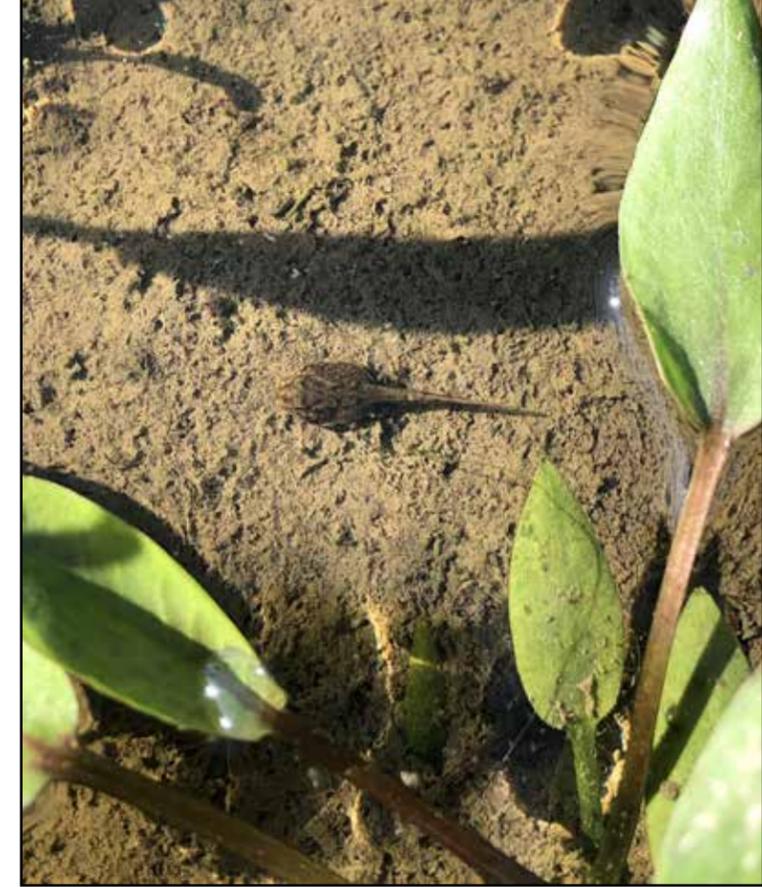
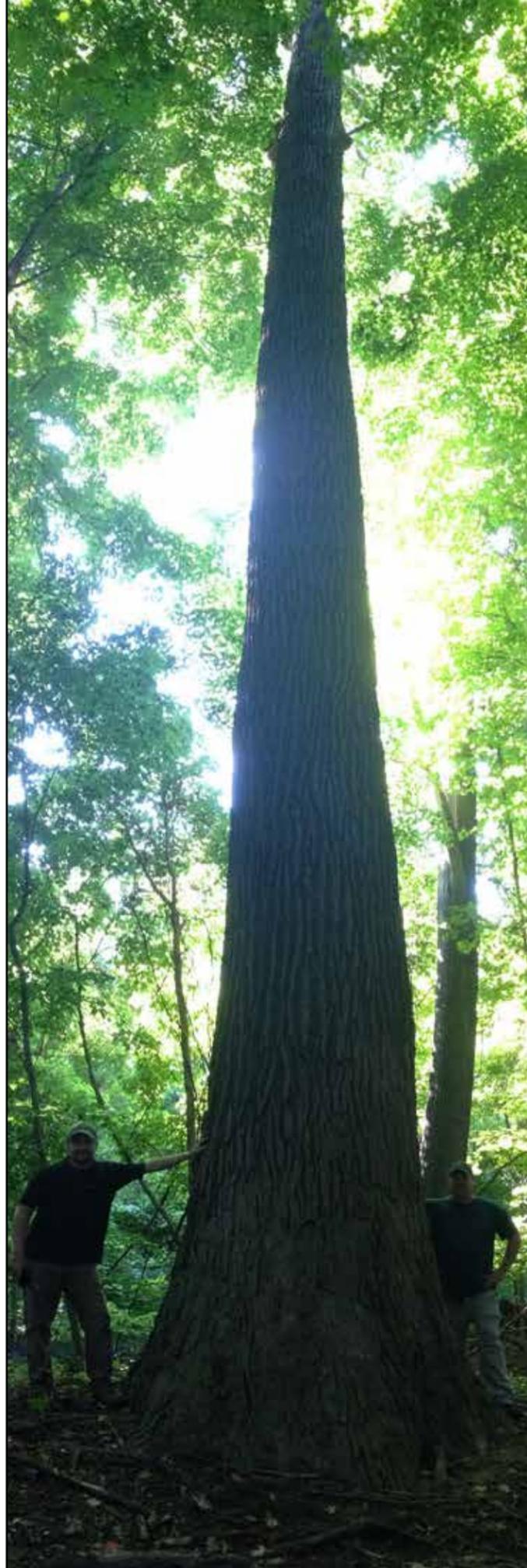
It provides critical habitat for rare plants, waterfowl, and migratory birds, including two Ohio state-listed species (endangered bristly smartweed and threatened sandhill crane.) It is adjacent to a 180-acre privately owned Land Conservancy protected property and near the 741-acre Punderson State Park, 466-acre Auburn Marsh Wildlife Area, and is considered of greatest continental significance to North American ducks, geese, and swans.



▲ **Whittlesey Beach Ridge Preserve in Lake County** **80 acres within the Chagrin River watershed** ►

*The Land Conservancy submitted a WRRSP application in August 2020 to Ohio EPA. Conservation restrictions were recorded October 31, 2022. Additional grant funds leveraged for property protection were provided by the Clean Ohio Conservation Fund and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.*

This property is significant to the natural history of Northeast Ohio because it includes a prominent beach ridge providing geological remnants of and clues relating to Lake Whittlesey, the ancient body of water that preceded Lake Erie. It also contains several large old-growth trees, three of which are among the top five largest of their species in the state, and 35.1 acres of high-quality wetlands and approximately 2,700 linear feet of Class A primary headwater habitat streams that flow into Ward Brook, a tributary of the Chagrin River. Conservation of these headwaters and tributaries will contribute to the protection and improvement of water quality of the Chagrin River. Efforts to treat and remove invasive species will start in 2023.



▲ **Seasons Road Fen in Portage County**  
**113 acres protected within the Tinkers Creek watershed**

*The Land Conservancy, in partnership with the Portage Park District, submitted a WRRSP application in August 2019 to Ohio EPA. Conservation restrictions were recorded November 10, 2022. Additional grant funds leveraged for property protection were provided by NAWCA.*

The Land Conservancy partnered with the Portage Park District to fund, acquire, and conserve this parcel; the park district took ownership of the property in April, 2022.

This property is adjacent to Herrick Fen State Nature Preserve and is part of an active, large-scale conservation effort aimed at protecting the Tinkers Creek corridor and connecting various conserved lands within the Tinkers Creek Watershed. It includes approximately 48 acres of wetlands and 4,446 linear feet of tributaries of Tinkers Creek, a major tributary to the Cuyahoga River. The property is one of three remaining priority parcels within the Tinkers Creek Greenway which when complete will comprise a corridor of approximately 16,000 acres of protected habitat within the watershed.

The Park District plans to restore the former agricultural fields to native meadow and forest habitat and close an inactive oil and gas well. After restoration is complete, the property will be opened to the public as a passive park.

# CONSERVATION HERITAGE LIBRARY: PRESERVING LANDOWNER STORIES

Every one of our nearly 600 conservation easement landowners has a story to tell: the inspiration that led them to conserve their land; the farm that's been in their family for generations; a commitment to conserving and protecting the special places of Northeast Ohio. Each story is unique, and for the last several years, Western Reserve Land Conservancy has been documenting these stories as part of our Conservation Heritage Library.

The project is designed to preserve landowners' stories, told in their own words, through short films that we produce and share on our website and YouTube channel. It is a great way to inspire conservation and maintain a record of a landowner's reasons for conservation now and for future generations. Landowners from all over our region have participated and we are always looking for new stories to tell. Want to tell us your story? Let us know! Email us at [communications@wrlandconservancy.org](mailto:communications@wrlandconservancy.org).



Scan this QR Code with your smart phone to watch the playlist of Conservation Heritage Library videos and subscribe to our YouTube channel to get instant notifications when we post a new video. Check out [YouTube.com/WesternReserveLandConservancy](https://www.youtube.com/WesternReserveLandConservancy) today!



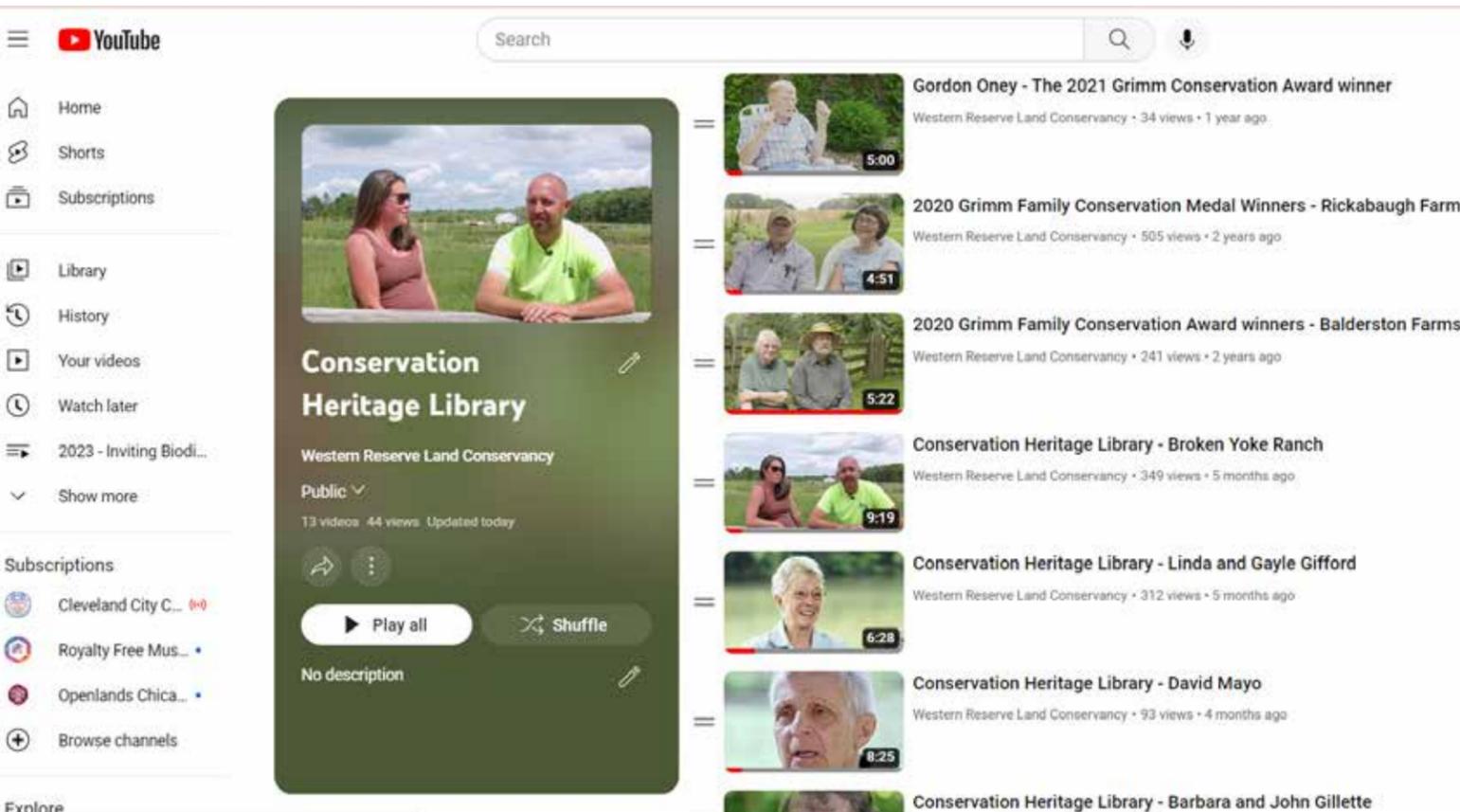
Dave Mayo's farm in Sheffield Township is 90-acres, half of which is tillable, working land and the rest is healthy hardwood forest. Two streams join at the northern edge of the woods from the property. "It's just gorgeous," Mayo said. "I fell in love with it when I saw it." He sees his conservation easement as a no-brainer, protecting land for future generations to enjoy. "If we don't protect this now, we're going to lose something that we can never regain."

One of the architects of the largest merger of land trusts in the nation, which created Western Reserve Land Conservancy, owns farmland that he and his wife purchased in 1974 for \$500 an acre. Gordon Oney established his conservation easement and went on to serve on the board of directors of the Firelands Land Conservancy, which merged with seven other local land trusts in 2006 to create Western Reserve Land Conservancy.



Linda Gifford has lived on her 27-acre property since 1980. A sixth-generation Geauga County resident, she spends days with her husband Gayle hiking and exploring their property and finding something new every time. "I remember helping my dad bring the cows in for milking," she said. "It was a wonderful childhood and really taught us how to appreciate nature. I think it made us better people." She calls her property "a pollinator's paradise," filled with milkweed and other plants and flowers that attract butterflies, bees and more.

If you ask the young son of the owners of Broken Yoke Ranch his favorite part of living on his family's farm, his answer is simple: "I love all the animals!" Dawn Fleming-Kendall and Darrell Kendall's conservation easement on 128 acres in Thompson, Ohio, ensures that their land will forever remain available for farming. Broken Yoke Ranch offers grass-fed beef, pork, and more. Check them out at [BrokenYokeRanch.com](http://BrokenYokeRanch.com).





## WESTERN RESERVE LAND CONSERVANCY CLOSING 2022 WITH A CONSERVATION MILESTONE 70,000 acres permanently protected for future generations

Western Reserve Land Conservancy closed out 2022 with some exciting conservation news: the nonprofit has now recorded the permanent protection of more than 70,000 acres of public and private land in Ohio. With the conservation of 2,715 acres at 36 properties in 2022, the Land Conservancy has now conserved 70,350 acres at 883 properties in 28 counties of Ohio. For context, 70,000 acres, is an area 4,117 times larger than First Energy Stadium, the home of the Cleveland Browns, and 130 percent larger than the entire City of Cleveland.

“This is a conservation milestone, a major accomplishment for our organization but an even greater asset for the people of Ohio now and for future generations,” said Rich Cochran, president and CEO of Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “To think that over three decades our organization has grown from a small group of concerned citizens wanting to preserve the beauty of the Chagrin River Valley to a national leader in conservation, preservation and restoration is simply amazing. Our staff, trustees, donors, partners and landowners are working together to create a shared vision of thriving, healthy communities nourished by vibrant natural lands, working family farms, and healthy cities.”

Additional accomplishments for the year include a robust environmental education program, hundreds of trees planted and distributed in and around Cleveland, and a lasting commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and justice.

In 2018, to support this important work and accelerate the pace of conservation, the Land Conservancy embarked on an ambitious effort to raise \$50 million in a comprehensive fundraising campaign to Conserve, Connect, & Sustain. At the end

of 2022, the organization has secured \$47 million and anticipates meeting the full fundraising goal by June 30.

“The Conserve, Connect, Sustain fundraising campaign will guarantee that the lands we protect today will remain protected for future generations,” said Cochran.

### Conservation and education are critical

In addition to conserving natural landscapes, working family farms, and urban greenspaces, Western Reserve Land Conservancy is committed to nurturing a lifelong love for our natural world by providing nature-based programming year-round for people of all ages. The goal of our educational opportunities is to help current and future generations develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for our natural world, ultimately leading to its protection.

During 2022, at a variety of events including Vibrant Places hikes, Field Explorations, Virtual Programming, our wildly popular Biodiversity Symposium, and our youth-oriented Nature Quest series, the Land Conservancy hosted over 550 participants at 27 in-person events. Thousands more joined virtually to hear from nationally-renowned scientific experts on a variety of nature topics.

“The parks and preserves we’ve helped create and expand are some of Ohio’s greatest natural treasures,” said Renee Boronka, manager of conservation education & outreach at Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “We want to engage people in ways that will be educational and inspiring, building a lifelong appreciation for nature and all that it provides. We think of our conservation work in terms of generations, so creating opportunities for people young and old to experience the beauty and solace of nature is critical to our mission.”

# NATURE NOTES:

## Getting to know the Subnivean Zone

by Shane Wohlken

When hiking through a field blanketed with deep snow on a cold, crisp winter day, it may seem devoid of the hustle and bustle of life typically associated with a warm summer’s day, but nothing could be further from the truth. Deep below the snow, a network of tunnels and cavities extend throughout the field, providing protection from predators and the elements, access to food sources, and nesting areas for all types of small mammals including moles, voles, shrews, mice, and even red squirrels. This livable space beneath the snow is known as the subnivean zone. The name comes from combining the words “sub”, meaning beneath, and “nive” from the Latin word for snow.

The subnivean zone can form in a number of ways. One way is through the accumulation of snow on top of tall grasses and other meadow plants that have fallen over, creating pockets of space where the stalks bend and overlay each other. What might seem like a very small space to us can seem cavernous to a mouse or shrew. Another way that spaces form is through sublimation. This is when the warmth of the earth melts the snow at the surface, creating a small cavity. The water vapor rises to

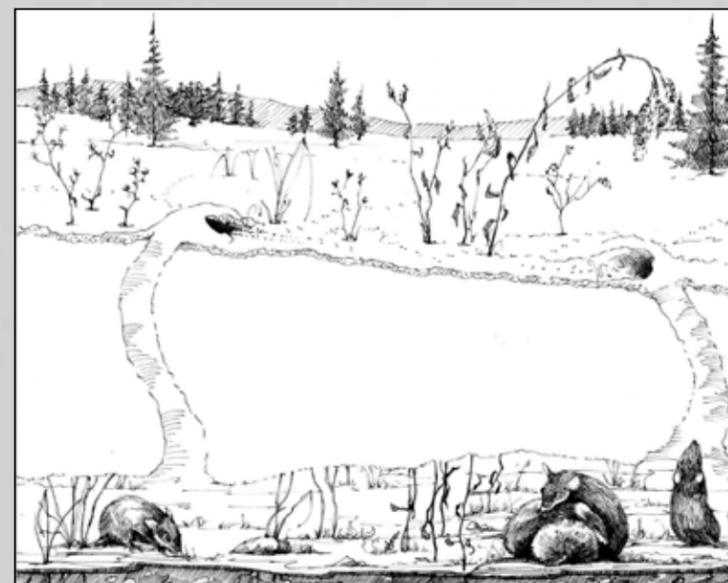


Photo credit: Adelaide Tyrol



the top of the cavity and refreezes, creating a structure that can withstand many feet of snow above it and helps lock in warmer air that rarely dips below 32 degrees, which can make a huge difference on a subzero degree night. Larger openings into these tunnels and cavities are often found beside warmer trees, shrubs, or rocks where melting occurs and provide the entrance and exit points for animals going about their daily lives. Burrowing animals then connect the entrance points and cavities with a network of tunnels that can be used to safely move between food sources without attracting the attention of predators above. Many small mammals will even den in the snow cavities, building out elaborate homes with food pantries, a nesting area, and even a bathroom.

While the subnivean zone does provide excellent protection for the small animals who inhabit it, dangers still lurk at every corner. Cave-ins and rapid thaws with flooding can be deadly, but since they typically occur in the spring, most animals have read the warning signs, whether it be higher temperatures outside or new spring shoots pushing up into their tunnels and cavities, and have vacated the zone. Throughout the winter, however, a number of predators specialized to find their prey under the snow keep the small denizens of the subnivean zone from becoming too complacent. Fox, coyote, and owls can often hear the movement of the small animals with pinpoint accuracy and will punch through the snow from above to get their prey. If you have ever seen a fox making large, arching leaps headfirst into deep snow, you can be sure that the hunt is on! Smaller predators like weasels and ermine will navigate the snow tunnels to their prey, sometimes taking up residence in the very home of their mid-day snack.

With the warmer days of spring, this unique zone where small animals were able to live and flourish through some of the harshest weather of the year will melt away, leaving only the merest impressions of tunnels and dens that created a bustling metropolis of life under the deep, silent snow.