

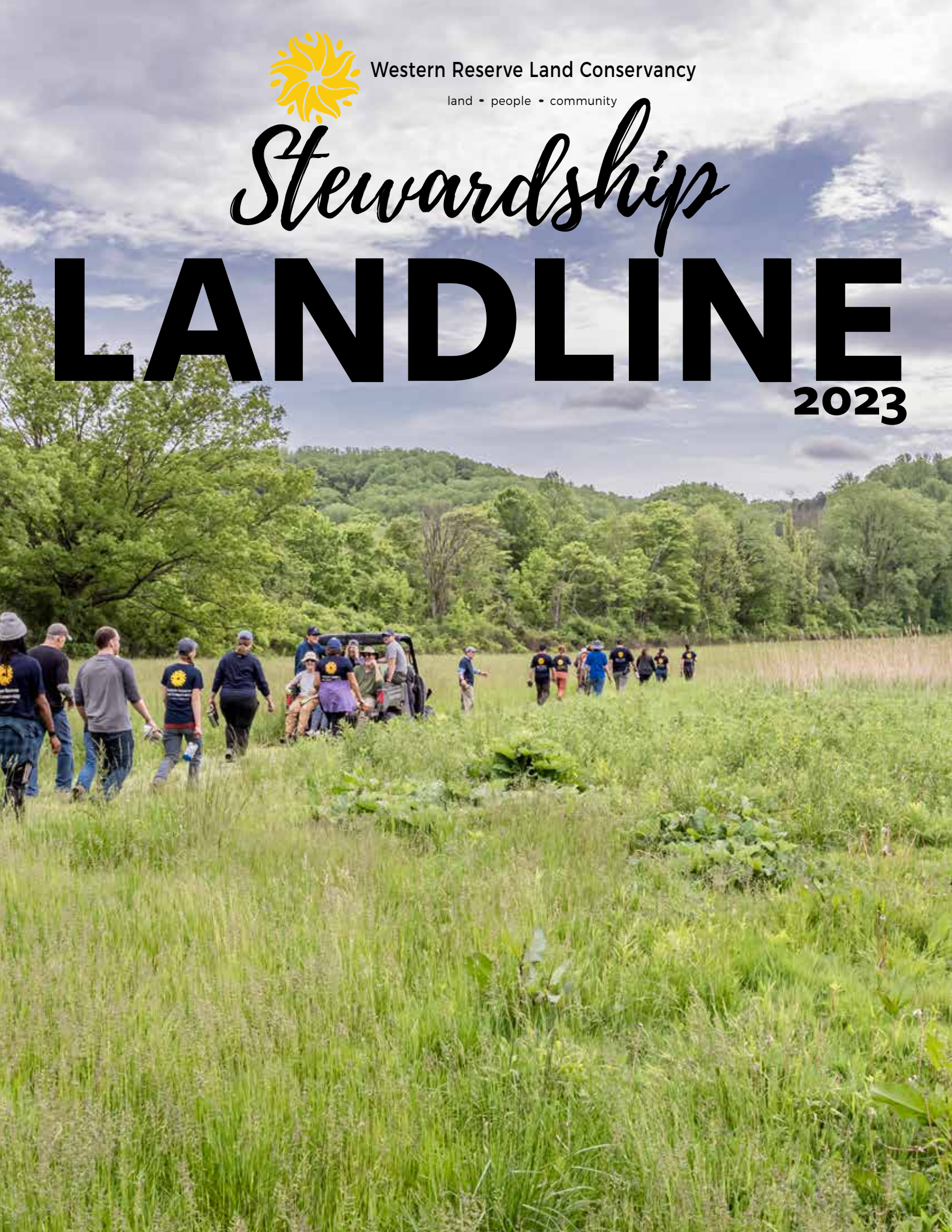


Western Reserve Land Conservancy

land • people • community

Stewardship

LANDLINE
2023





^ Jim Bissell and Pete McDonald conducting a bio-blitz at South Farm - Sherwin Bird Sanctuary in Waite Hill, OH

A PRIVATE AND PUBLIC PURPOSE

Welcome to landowners who worked with the Land Conservancy in 2022 to permanently protect your amazing properties! You have joined a group of over 550 owners of parks, natural areas, farms, and urban green spaces that are protected in perpetuity with conservation easements held by the Land Conservancy. To date, we have protected 892 properties and 71,071 acres! This publication is our annual newsletter created specifically for you. In this edition of our Stewardship Landline, you will find important announcements and information about our stewardship program. We hope you have the time to read through the articles and reach out to our staff if you have any questions or simply want to touch base.

When it comes down to it, what we're doing together to protect and steward land throughout northern Ohio is unique and invaluable. For generations, there have been legal options like deed restrictions to protect land; however, in 1980 the federal government made the donation of a conservation easement eligible as an income tax deduction and a more permanent way to protect land. These changes started the modern land trust movement and were a catalyst for helping private landowners achieve their dreams of knowing that their land would be protected forever. Currently, the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), the organization that sets the standards and practices for land trusts throughout the country, estimates that there are over 1,000 land trusts throughout the nation. LTA also estimates that conservation easements held by land trusts and other qualified agencies have protected about 60 million acres of land!

One of the unique aspects of conservation easement law is that in order to qualify for the tax deduction, a conservation easement must meet at least one of four specific conservation purposes for protecting land. I am

listing the purposes here in the most general terms: 1) Land for outdoor recreation or education of the public; 2) Natural habitat; 3) Open space including farms and forest land as recommended in local, state, or federal conservation plans; and 4) Historic land or structures. Woven throughout the federal law is the clear concept that protecting land will yield a public benefit. This is obvious in the case of protecting public parks and recreational land, but some people wonder how private land protection serves the public. Isn't it just benefitting a small group of people in a limited number of communities?

When I explain the public benefit of private land conservation to people who are unfamiliar with our work, I start at a macro level and describe how privately protected green space, no matter where it is located, benefits air and water quality for all people and communities throughout the region. Privately protected wetlands and floodplains along small streams or rivers help filter and slow down water, thereby preventing flooding downstream in other communities and properties. Private land conservation also benefits plants, animals, and all other species whose habitats are dwindling. Eagles, salamanders, Virginia bluebells, and turkey tail fungus don't care who own the land as long the habitat is healthy and can support their life cycles.

So, as we revel in the satisfaction of achieving your dreams of permanently protecting the land you love, we should also remind ourselves that the protection of private land has an invaluable public purpose.

We hope you enjoy this edition of the Stewardship Landline, and we look forward to seeing you on our stewardship visits. Thank you for your support and enduring partnership in conservation!

Pete McDonald

Director of Land Stewardship

CONSERVATION EASEMENT STEWARDSHIP VISITS

Our Land Stewardship Team has started annual visits to conserved properties. These visits help us build a record of responsible stewardship, documenting changes to your properties over time related to the terms of the conservation easement. Here are some things to keep in mind about our stewardship program:

- We will visit your property once a year to ensure that your conservation easement is being upheld in perpetuity. Annual visits are a requirement for maintaining our status as an accredited land trust, and these visits are a standard practice for all land trusts throughout the country.
- Expect that we will call you about a week ahead of time to schedule a visit. While you do not need to meet us for the visit, we always enjoy catching up in person, and hiking the property with you is even better. Please let your land steward know if you want to meet for the visit this year.
- Let us know before our visit if you need a copy of your conservation easement or baseline documentation report. We can bring these to our visit, mail them, or email them to you.
- Let us know in advance about any questions you would like addressed during the visit. Call the land steward for your region if you have questions.

✓ Front row: Sarah Kitson, Pete McDonald, Kate Pilacky, and Dale Dunford
Back row: Shane Wohlken and George Warnock



CHANGES ON YOUR PROPERTY?

Are you selling your property? In accordance with your conservation easement, please notify us prior to the sale of your property. This allows us to arrange a meeting with the new landowner and begin our stewardship partnership. Also, most conservation easements include a Land Conservancy Stewardship Fee at the time of sale. These fees are critical to funding our program and protecting your land in perpetuity.

Are you planning big changes to your property? Are you planning on building a home, harvesting timber, adding a barn, digging a pond, or any other major activity permitted by your conservation easement? If so, please notify us as many major activities require written notice and approval by Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

Prior notification helps to assure that both the landowner and the Land Conservancy agree that the activity complies with the terms of the easement. This helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures the continued protection of your property. When in doubt, give us a call. We're always happy to hear from you.

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LANDOWNER SPOTLIGHT

by Pete McDonald



▲ Rows of blueberry bushes at Messenger Century Farm

Buying the Farm

In 2007, Dee and Bill Belew donated a conservation easement on their 68-acre Messenger Century Farm in Auburn Township, Geauga County to Western Reserve Land Conservancy. Their deep love for the land and the Messenger family motivated them to protect their property in perpetuity. Earlier this year, Dee and Bill visited the Land Conservancy headquarters for an interview about conserving their farm.

Like so many landowners we work with, the Belews' path to protecting their farm is rich in history and stories of land, people, and community. Dee grew up in Bedford, Bill in Solon, and they met when they were high-school teenagers. Dee was working at Lawson's and Bill was working next door at The Red Barn.

"He had a '57 Chevy and I had a little Metropolitan. He liked my car and I liked his, and that was it," Dee said.

Dee and Bill raised their family on Messenger Road in Auburn Township on 12 acres of land. They still remember Helen and Lewis Messenger, who owned the historic farm down the road, pulling into their driveway to welcome them to the community. They hit it off immediately and developed a very special relationship over many years. Eventually, Dee and Bill's two children even thought of the Messengers as their grandparents. Lewis was a retired Great Lakes

ship captain and "he was the kindest, sweetest man you would ever want to meet," Dee said. "Whatever we did for him, it came right back to us. I would help him split wood, and the next day he would be filling my woodshed because I worked all the time," Bill said. According to the Belews, Lewis was a natural-born land conservationist. He loved the trees and forest and spent as much time as he could caring for the farm.

Eventually, Dee and Bill wanted to buy a farm and had money down on a property in Troy Township, but when they took Lewis there to check it out he said, "What about my farm?" By that time, they were helping Lewis take care of Helen, who had memory loss, and helping him with things around the farm too. So, they made an arrangement with Lewis and Helen to purchase the farm. They agreed that Lewis and Helen could stay in the farm house until they were unable. In 1992 Dee and Bill purchased the farm and continued to cherish their time with Lewis and Helen for several years.

"When Lewis was in the hospital, Dee and I told him his farm was in good hands, that we'd always take care of it," Bill said. "He looked at us and said, 'I know, because if you don't, I'm going to come down and haunt you!'" Reminiscing about buying the farm Dee said, "Who would have guessed over 50 years ago that we would own the house and farm we fell in love with the first time we drove past it?"

◀ Bill and Dee Belew, owners and operators of Messenger Century Farm (2007)

Working the Farm

After working 30 years as a lineman for AT&T, in 1995 Bill retired and threw all of his efforts into the farm. Dee worked for Kenston schools for many years and also decided to devote her time to the farm. With the help of their family, Dee and Bill have taken on many farm endeavors over the years. They ran a horse boarding operation and made hay in the fields. The Messenger family made maple syrup on the farm as far back as the 1830s. In 1993, Bill, Dee, and family hung 1,800 buckets and used a team of draft horses to collect the sap. The Messenger sugarhouse, where the Belews boiled that year, is rumored to be the oldest sugarhouse in the county. Now, the Belews collect sap with a tubing system and use all of the modern sugaring equipment in a smaller efficient sugarhouse next to their century home. Dee, Bill, and their son Bill and his wife Amy also started a pick-your-own blueberry operation, planting and tending to thousands of blueberry bushes and inviting the public to pick and purchase berries directly from the farm.

The Belews feel so fortunate and grateful that their children and their families live close to the farm and are very involved in many aspects of what they do. They have tried to set up their farming endeavors so that they are profitable and the farm operations can be passed on to the next generations.

Conserving the Farm

As they developed their farming operations, Dee and Bill always had it on their mind that they wanted to honor the Messengers’ legacy by permanently protecting the farm. Many developers were knocking on their door to buy the farm, but that was not a consideration. They looked into various conservation programs, but nothing seemed right until Dee, at a Master Gardening program, met Fran Meyers whose husband Ed was the legal counsel at the time for Western Reserved Land Conservancy. “Fran told me I needed to talk to her husband. Once we spoke with him, we knew it was that we were looking for. We could have been paid for a conservation easement through other programs, but what we liked about

▼ The property features a century home and historic barn



working with the Land Conservancy was that they listened to us and gave us the time we needed to decide what we wanted,” Dee said.

The Land Conservancy and the Belews worked together to establish their long-term goals for the land and the farming operation, which finally became memorialized in the conservation easement that was recorded in November of 2007. The conservation easement defined permitted use zones including a building area for the house and farm structures, a field area that can be used for all forms of farming, and a forested area that balances the goals of protecting natural habitat as well as allowing working forest activities like maple syrup production and sustainable timber harvests. Reflecting on their decision Bill said, “We are the stewards right now, but someone else will have to do it down the road. Knowing that the land is protected makes you sleep good at night.”

Sharing the Farm

Messenger Century Farm is a Geauga County gem with a century home, historic barn, spring-fed pond, rolling horse pastures, rows of blueberries, a hay field framed by mature trees, and a majestic forest with large oaks, maples, tulip, hickory, and other hardwoods. Dee, Bill, and their family work tirelessly to share the farm and their love of land conservation with family, friends, and the public. They are involved in the Maple Producers of Northeast Ohio and the annual Maple Tours that take place throughout the region. They also participate in the Harvest Host program where RV travelers can sign up to park at the farm, stay the night, tour the farm, and purchase farm goods directly from the farmer. Of late, they are getting more involved in community initiatives to showcase local history, especially the history of the farm, and local art as well.

Dee and Bill have been invaluable to spreading the word about the Land Conservancy’s work. On March

5th over two dozen attendees enjoyed a tour of the sugarbush at the farm as part of the Land Conservancy’s Vibrant Places hiking series. Every summer, they host blueberry pickings for Land Conservancy staff and supporters, encouraging guests to pick plenty to eat and even more to freeze. “I love tying in the Land Conservancy with everything we do. We want people to understand how and why we protected the land,” Dee said.



▲ One-year old Amirah picking Belew-berries

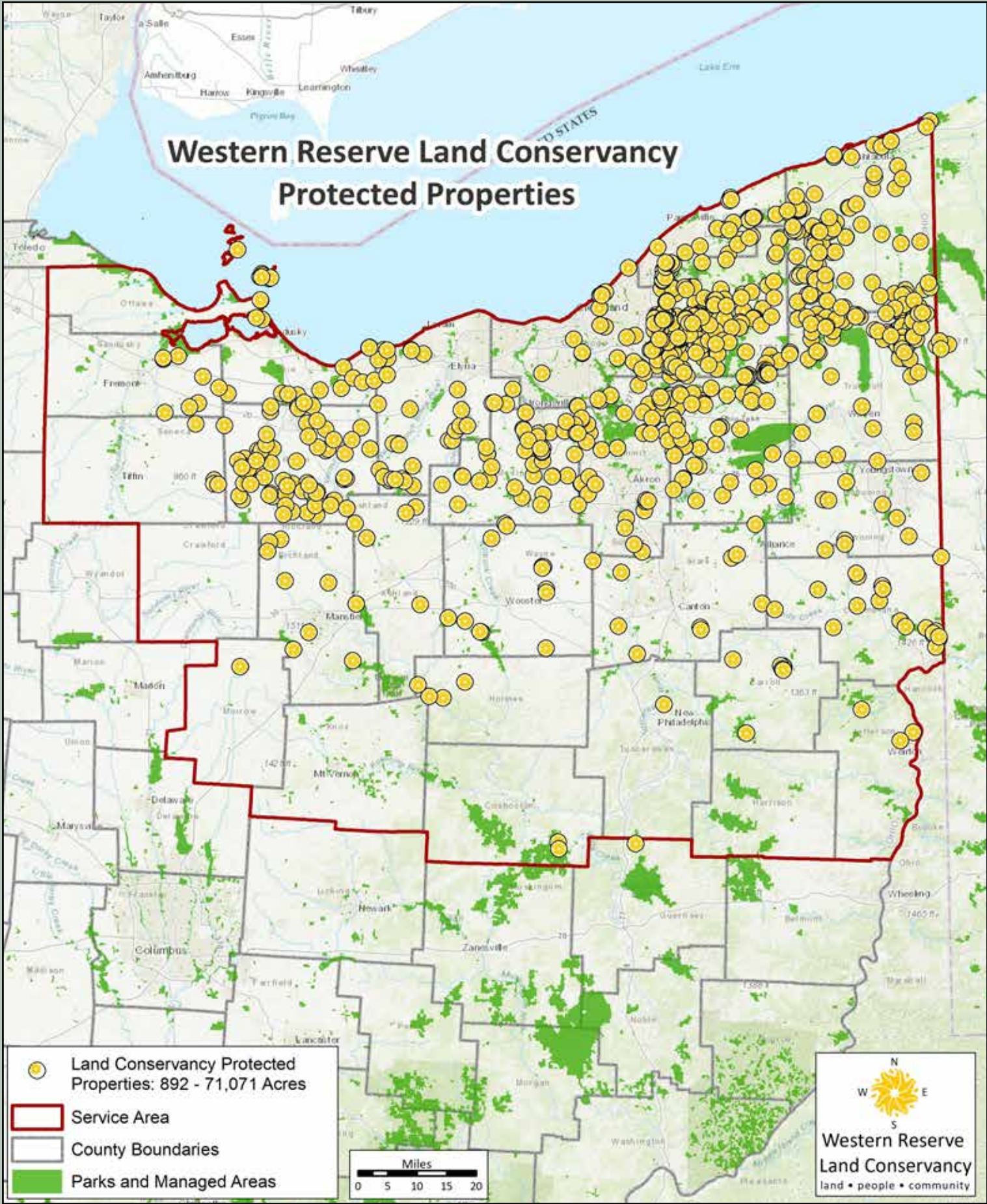
Our staff loves visiting the farm too. “My husband and I brought our one-year old daughter out for blueberry picking last summer, and she couldn’t get enough,” said Madison Shaheen, the Land Conservancy’s Communications & Marketing Specialist. “One of the great benefits of working here is that we get to know the landowners really well. We spend time with them on their properties and create shared memories that last forever.”

For years, Dee has also volunteered her time at the Land Conservancy’s Conservation Center in Moreland Hills, helping with administrative tasks, gardening, and

decorating for the Christmas holiday. The Belews brought their Jack Russell Terrier named Kutter to our interview, and they said that Jack Russells are good on a farm because of their high energy. After knowing Dee and Bill for so many years, we’re not even sure Kutter can keep up with their energy and enthusiasm!

Dee and Bill have been married for 56 years. Their son Bill and his wife Amy live on a parcel connected to the farm. Their home was originally part of the Messenger farmstead and was where Dee and Bill lived during the farm ownership transition. Dee and Bill’s daughter Kellie and her husband Jeremy also live down the road from the farm. Dee and Bill have six wonderful grandchildren. Western Reserve Land Conservancy is so grateful to have them as partners in our conservation efforts, and we are so grateful to call them friends.

BY THE NUMBERS



County	Conserved Properties	Acres Conserved
Ashland	5	402
Ashtabula	111	10,994
Carroll	7	633
Columbiana	22	944
Coshocton	2	2,762
Cuyahoga	110	2,312
Erie	21	1,682
Geauga	155	10,048
Guernsey	1	56
Holmes	4	684
Huron	71	7,340
Jefferson	3	259
Lake	40	2,148
Lorain	33	4,139
Lucas	1	229
Mahoning	9	1,023
Medina	41	1,543
Mercer	5	842
Morrow	1	194
Ottawa	5	124
Portage	61	3,719
Richland	9	1,882
Sandusky	8	1,422
Seneca	4	372
Stark	10	935
Summit	42	1,597
Trumbull	98	11,730
Tuscarawas	1	185
Wayne	12	871
Total	892	71,071



311
farms permanently preserved



200
parks and preserves created



15,000
trees planted and given away in the greater Cleveland area



Land conserved in
25 watersheds



Habitat protected for
dozens
of endangered species

KNOW YOUR CONSERVATION EASEMENT: WHY STEWARDSHIP VISITS ARE ESSENTIAL

by Shane Wohlken



Every year, Land Stewards for Western Reserve Land Conservancy call, email, text, or send a letter to each conservation easement (CE) landowner to schedule an annual stewardship visit to their property. Even if we are doing a remote visit by airplane or satellite imagery, we contact landowners to keep in touch and answer questions they may have related to the CE. These annual stewardship visits are essential to the protection of CE properties, but why? The short and technical answer is that annual visits are required by the standards and practices for accredited land trusts, and the visits satisfy the IRS requirement for non-profit tax exempt land trusts to have the capacity and resources to protect land in perpetuity. The key reason, however, is that our annual visits keep us connected to landowners, who are our most important conservation partners.

Although the Land Conservancy recently became an accredited land trust in 2019, we have completed annual stewardship visits since our inception in the mid-1980s. Land Trust Alliance (LTA) is a national conservation organization that helps set standards and practices for land trusts throughout the country. These standards are based on the vast experience of over 1,000 land trusts and conservation groups that have protected thousands of properties and millions of acres. At least one visit per year has proven to be a good way to observe and document any significant changes on the property related to the CE.

Let's drill down a little deeper to understand why LTA requires annual stewardship visits. CEs can be granted for a number of important reasons, including protecting a farm that has been in a family for generations, securing disappearing habitat for wildlife, ensuring greenspace for local communities, or making sure important water sources provide clean, nourishing water for centuries to come. In short, CE's limit how a property can be developed, used, and impacted. By granting a CE, landowners are donating some of their property rights to the Land Conservancy to protect in perpetuity. Federal law allows the original landowner who donated the CE to seek an income tax deduction based on the value of the donated rights. The donation is considered a charitable gift because protecting land for the purposes described above is a public benefit even though the land is privately owned. One key aspect of the law, however, is that land trusts who hold CEs must have the capacity and resources to keep the land protected in perpetuity. The law also requires that every tax-qualified CE provide the right for the Land Conservancy to make visits to the property to ensure the terms of the CE are being upheld.

Annual visits and diligent stewardship work helps meet these critical requirements, which helps maintain the Land Conservancy's status as a tax exempt non-profit organization with the IRS.

As you can see, while it is tempting to think that by simply putting land under the protection of a CE, we can pat ourselves on the back for a job well done and sit back to enjoy the beautiful land we have protected, but the truth is, the job of protecting that land is just beginning. When a property is put under protection, a baseline documentation report is written. This provides a detailed snapshot of the property, including photos, maps, species inventories, and narratives that accurately describe the conservation value of the property at the time the CE is recorded. When Land Stewards make the annual visits to a CE property, they use the baseline documentation report for that property to determine if any significant changes have been made. If a significant change has been made, it must be documented and categorized either as an exercised right permitted by the easement, an approved change permitted by the Land Conservancy, or a violation of the easement that needs to be rectified to get the property back into compliance with the terms of the easement. All changes, whether permitted or not, cannot significantly negatively impact the conservation values protected by the CE. If the Land Conservancy were to allow such a change, it would not only endanger our accreditation with LTA and our non-profit status with the IRS, but would also conflict with our purpose and mission and damage the trust that we have cultivated over the years with landowners and communities who expect us to protect important land throughout northern Ohio in perpetuity.

Lastly, so much of our work is built on relationships. Without the continuing support and friendship of CE landowners, our work would become very difficult. Whether they are an original grantor of the CE or are a successor CE landowner, our favorite part of the job is learning about a favorite tree on their farm, seeing the old camping spot that the grandkids still use during the summer, or seeing the results of the prairie restoration they have been working on for years. We take our work very seriously to help protect the land you love. Learning about your history with your property and your plans for the future really underscores the importance of our work and of our deep partnership with landowners throughout our region. We love hearing from you and connecting during our annual stewardship visits is such a great way to keep in touch.

REMEMBERING OUR LANDOWNERS AND THEIR LEGACIES

At Western Reserve Land Conservancy, it is our privilege to work with landowners across the region to permanently conserve and steward cherished local landscapes. We foster strong and lasting partnerships and friendships with generations of landowners. We feel a true sense of loss when landowners pass away. Through the work that we do to conserve land in perpetuity, it is our commitment to remember, honor, and celebrate the tremendous legacy of those landowners who are no longer with us. We recently said goodbye to these remarkable landowners:

Elmer William Geil

Barbara Kremer

David Robert Siekkinen

Joe Wesley

Scott Wolstein

Laurance J. "Larry" Young

We apologize for any errors or omissions. If a name has been omitted or listed incorrectly please contact the Land Conservancy at 440.528.4150.

SOME SUPPORTERS LEAVE LAND TO THE LAND CONSERVANCY

You have made the most lasting gift of all by donating a conservation easement. But some landowners wonder how else they can help. As part of your estate planning, you may choose to leave your property to Western Reserve Land Conservancy and become members of the Land Conservancy's White Oak Legacy Society.

The White Oak Legacy Society is a special group of Western Reserve Land Conservancy supporters who have made a lasting commitment to land protection and urban revitalization through a variety of estate-planning tools, including bequest in a will or trust, life estate, charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, IRA designations, and gifts of life insurance.

For more information contact Stella Dilik, Chief Development Officer, at 440.528.4150 or sdilik@wrlandconservancy.org.





Western Reserve Land Conservancy

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LAND. PEOPLE. COMMUNITY.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is Ohio's largest land trust and noted to be one of the top in the country. Our talented staff is dedicated to preserving natural areas, farmland, and coastal lands in northern and eastern Ohio and working statewide to help cities devastated by the foreclosure crisis.

Our Mission: Provide the people of northern and eastern Ohio with essential natural assets through land conservation and restoration.

Our Vision: Thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant natural areas, healthy cities, and working farms.

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