



The Legacy of a River



MINNESOTA LAND TRUST
MID-YEAR REVIEW
FALL 2020

BEYOND HEALING THE LAND, THE GILLITZERS HOPE TO IMPART A SENSE OF STEWARDSHIP TO THEIR CHILDREN. IT'S TEACHING THEM A GOOD LAND ETHIC — HOW THE LAND CAN PROVIDE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME HOW YOU HAVE TO BE RESPECTFUL TO THE LAND.

Starting in Lake Osakis, the Sauk River flows over 120 miles across portions of five counties in central Minnesota, past farms and through towns, before it reaches the Mississippi River. Like all rivers, the Sauk helps sustain the communities that have taken root along its banks. But as those communities have grown, the river is in danger of being permanently changed by the evolving land uses along it. Every year local communities like St. Cloud and Cold Spring grow outwards, developing natural lands, expanding roads, and creating barriers to wildlife.

Ever since getting a deer on his first hunt at age 13, Carl Lieser has felt a deep connection to the land and the Sauk. Carl grew up hunting along the Sauk River, and has seen firsthand the spread of sprawl that has begun to affect the area. That's why this year he chose to protect his 37-acre property on the banks of the Sauk through a conservation easement with the Minnesota Land Trust.

"Almost every year someone asks if I'm willing to sell or develop this land," says Carl. But his family still uses the land, from his 28-year-old son to his 81-year-old mother who still hunts. The conservation streak runs deep in the Lieser family. As properties in the Sauk watershed change hands and a new generation begins to work the land, it's more important than ever that the ethic for conservation is passed along.

Today, the need for conservation couldn't be more urgent.

In Minnesota, thousands of acres of marginal agricultural lands have been enrolled in the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and restored to natural landscapes for the benefit of wildlife and water quality. Unfortunately, as these contracts expire many landowners choose to re-develop these lands, thus destroying many of the program's conservation gains. In 2018 more than 3,000 acres of CRP contracts expired in Stearns County alone. According to the county's Soil and Water Conservation District, that number will quadruple to 12,000 acres by the end of 2024. These vulnerable lands are privately owned, so working directly with landowners to keep them protected is a must for conservation and the health of the Sauk River.

A community comes together

These growing challenges led a group of neighbors to form the River Bottom Whitetails, an organization they established to preserve natural hunting lands along the Sauk for future generations.

These dedicated neighbors, including the Liesers, came together to ensure their properties would continue to serve as natural habitat for deer, pheasants, wild turkey, and other wildlife. The Whitetails group determined that they would need to



cooperatively manage both their lands and the associated deer herds, so they began active management strategies.

In 2019, new funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund allowed the Minnesota Land Trust and local partners (the Sauk River Watershed District, Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Stearns, Todd, Pope, and Douglas counties, Pheasants Forever, and the Nature Conservancy) to launch the Sauk River Watershed Habitat Protection & Restoration Program, dedicated to protecting 1,200 acres of important lands along the Sauk River.

When word of the new program reached the River Bottom Whitetails landowners, the group's members jumped at the opportunity to make their conservation and restoration work permanent. In a span of a few months, the Land Trust received more applications from interested landowners than ever before.

John Maile, Sr. was one of those applicants, and recently protected his 85-acre property with the Minnesota Land Trust. As Carl Lieser's neighbor, Maile recognized the importance of combining protected lands to create a larger complex for wildlife and water quality.

"I'm an outdoors person; I've hunted for over 60 years; I canoe the river every spring and know the area well," says John. "Anything that I can do to preserve the

character and beauty of this river, I want to do it."

Protecting the present for the future

That local community-mindedness and conservation ethic have drawn in new families looking to protect natural lands along the Sauk where their families can live and thrive.

Like the Liesers and the Mailes, the Gillitzers were one of those Sauk River families ready to invest in conservation. "While our friends were travelling the world and doing fun stuff, we were investing in land," says Adria Gillitzer. The Gillitzer family recently worked with the Minnesota Land Trust to protect their 116-acre property in the Sauk River Watershed with a conservation easement.

After buying their first parcel of land near the Sauk while they were still in their twenties, the Gillitzers dedicated themselves to restoring and healing the property, recreating the natural landscapes that dominated the area pre-European settlement. Beyond healing the land, the Gillitzers hope to impart a sense of stewardship to their children as they grow up in the forests. "They love building forts, hiking, and exploring the land. It's teaching them a good land ethic — how the land



can provide, but at the same time how you have to be respectful to the land," says Adria.

That grassroots conservation ethic is going to be even more vital in coming years as the region continues to grow. The population of Stearns County has grown nearly 7% in the past decade, and as more residents seek the experience of rural living, will continue to grow quickly. Like Carl Lieser and John Maile Sr., who learned to love and care for the Sauk River generations ago, the Gillitzer children and other youth are learning about respecting the land in a way that benefits both new neighbors and wildlife.

"I've lived along the riverbanks all my life and the river is a very special place to me," says John. "I have two grandsons and I want them and any other

young person for that matter, to be able to enjoy the experiences along the river like I have."

And now, thanks to his efforts and those of other conservation-minded neighbors in the community, they will.



SAINT CLOUD

COLD SPRING

DULUTH NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM (DNAP)



SAINT LOUIS RIVER NATURAL AREA



The program aims to protect high-quality undeveloped areas within the city that meet scientific criteria for native plant communities; special species of plants and wildlife; bird congregation areas; special water features; and geological landforms.

The Duluth Natural Areas Program (DNAP) is a city ordinance to preserve Duluth's natural heritage for the public good by protecting city-owned lands that have environmental significance. The program aims to protect high-quality undeveloped areas within the city that meet scientific criteria for native plant communities; special species of plants and wildlife; bird congregation areas; special water features; and geological landforms. These areas are often valued places where residents and visitors get outdoors.

This year, in the biggest expansion of the DNAP program since its inception, the City took a giant step and designated approximately 1,200 acres along the river as the St. Louis River Natural Area. Approximately one third of this area is already in City ownership and is now permanently protected. Another third of the area will be acquired from St. Louis County and protected over the next two years. And the City is working with willing private

landowners to acquire the remaining third. In its ongoing partnership with the City of Duluth, the Minnesota Land Trust helped to secure funding to support the City designation process and to acquire funds for acquisition of parcels not under city ownership.

The St. Louis River Natural Area is comprised of nine places along the shoreline of the river, stretching from Chambers Grove Park in the Fond du Lac neighborhood on the west to Grassy Point in the Irving neighborhood on the east. Combined, the area is home to a mix of 17 distinct native plant communities. The water features include four trout streams and of course, the largest freshwater estuary in North America, the St. Louis River Estuary. The area is nesting and stopover habitat for at least 169 species of birds, including 52 species of concern.

The land is publicly accessible, and the permanent protections of the DNAP means that it cannot be sold, developed, or otherwise degraded — but will instead always serve

as an important natural community asset. Recreational uses are abundant and include hiking, biking, shore fishing, birdwatching, picnicking, and access for paddling. Several sites include carry-in boat access and one site will have motorized boat access. The sustainable, natural-surface Waabizheshikana (“The Marten Trail”) which meets Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, will connect eight of the nine natural area places, creating accessible outdoor spaces for all.

According to Gini Breidenbach, restoration program manager of the Land Trust, “Many of the places in the natural area surround aquatic sites that have been or will be restored as part of the Area of Concern clean-up process. The natural area designation helps ensure the long-term integrity of these restored areas.”

The river is once again thriving and inviting all to come to the water and be refreshed. It is no longer uncommon to see kids and families swimming in the river on warm summer days.

The Land Trust is continuing to work closely with the City of Duluth to identify new opportunities for protection, restoration, and enhancement through a city-wide natural resources planning effort, the results of which will ensure the long-term presence of the city's outstanding natural resources for all.



THE 1200 ACRES OF THE ST. LOUIS RIVER NATURAL AREA BOASTS 4 TROUT STREAMS; HOME TO 17 DISTINCT NATIVE PLANT COMMUNITIES AND HABITAT FOR OVER 169 SPECIES OF BIRDS.



Every year the Land Trust selects a volunteer, landowner, and partner of the year from a great pool of dedicated conservationists. Here are our 2020 Award Winners.

TREASURED PLACES 2020

2020

Partner of the Year

Over the last 20 years, the **RAINY LAKE CONSERVANCY**, a non-profit Canadian organization, has worked side by side with the Land Trust to further land protections in the Rainy Lake area watershed and has had an unmistakable impact on the area.

A rare example of a cross-border land trust partnership, the groups have successfully protected miles of shoreline and nearly 500 acres of land including the place where Ernest Oberholtzer, a founding member of the Wilderness Society, lived.



Next to Voyageurs National Park, Rainy Lake is enormous at 227,604 acres and straddles the borders of Ontario and Minnesota. The area is celebrated for its wilderness qualities of clean water, majestic red and white pines, rare species, uncluttered shorelines, and exceptional beauty.

The Rainy Lake Conservancy has protected numerous properties, funded and participated in research for various species and fisheries, and has

successfully advocated for new governmental shoreline protections on the Canadian side of Rainy Lake.

“We are thrilled by the award and grateful for our partnership,” says Carolyn Wallis, current President of Rainy Lake Conservancy. “It’s important to protect this area so that present and future generations can continue to enjoy it as a wilderness.”

This year’s celebration was virtual. View short videos of each honoree at mnland.org/treasured.

Landowners of the Year



CARTER AND FLORENCE HEDEEM have a deep reverence for nature that permeates their lives. For them the land is a place for reflection and rejuvenation, but you won’t find them sitting idle. From planting thousands of trees, pulling invasive plants, and monitoring water quality, to their volunteer work on the North Country Trail and with the Land Trust, Carter and Florence lead an active life of service that honors their values. They even built their off-the-grid cabin themselves using locally sourced timber and recycled materials!

Situated in Hubbard County, their property is among the earliest Land Trust-held easements, donated in 1998. The easement protects 180 acres of diverse forest, unique wetlands, and close to a mile of shoreline on Skunk Lake, creating a haven for fish and wildlife and helping to preserve a significant amount of natural habitat in a highly developable landscape just 12 miles north of Park Rapids.

Carter and Florence are the second generation of Hedeems to steward the property. They say, “We are incredibly happy that our son Eric, [also a Land Trust volunteer], and his wife share in our love of the land and are eager to continue caring for the property for many years to come.”

“John Peck” Volunteer of the Year



When **JIM ODDEN** joined the Land Trust’s troop of certified volunteer monitors in 2014, he learned the ropes from the master of monitors and namesake of the Volunteer Award, John Peck.

Since then Jim has been a tireless and enthusiastic volunteer, some years even monitoring up to 13 properties in a single season. His monitoring has taken him to nine counties, and varied landscapes including agricultural lands, prairies, woods, river bottoms and the big sky areas of western Minnesota.

Currently residing in Alexandria, Jim is a retired elementary school teacher and a graduate of the University of Minnesota-Morris. He’s no stranger to volunteering his time to many causes; he’s even the self-proclaimed “weather dude” for his town, reporting his daily findings to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

“I signed up to monitor because I thought it sounded fun,” says Jim, “Monitoring has given me a chance to see a lot of the state. Thanks to you guys, much of it is being protected and I’m glad to be a part of that.”

I SIGNED UP TO MONITOR BECAUSE I THOUGHT IT SOUNDED FUN. THANKS TO YOU GUYS, **MUCH OF [THE STATE] IS BEING PROTECTED** AND I’M GLAD TO BE A PART OF THAT.

BOARD UPDATES

We are pleased to announce the following appointments to our board:



AUSTIN DAMIANI
President,
Cromptonize, LLC



ELIZABETH WINTON
Community
Volunteer



BRANDON HAUGH
Senior Manager,
Boulay PLLP



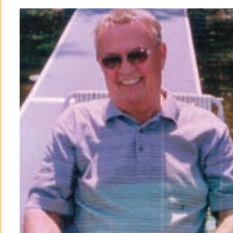
JANE WYATT
Investment
Professional

STAFF UPDATES

IAN COLBY, now a second-year law student at the University of Minnesota Law School, joined the Land Trust as a Summer Legal Intern via a competitive selection process and a grant from the Energy, Natural Resources and Environment section of the Minnesota State Bar Association.

“We were thrilled to have Ian onboard. He gained first-hand experience solving real world real estate and environmental issues,” said Sue Steinwall, Land Trust stewardship director and one of Ian’s mentors this summer.

LEAVING A LEGACY



Including the Minnesota Land Trust in your will is a great way to support conservation. Visit www.mnland.org/plannedgiving.

Growing up, Donald J. Herman had an upbringing that focused on outdoor opportunities — hunting pheasant, fishing, and exploring the outdoors. After attending the University of South Dakota and serving in the Navy, he started his own business as one of the nation’s first software entrepreneurs in the 1960s.

When his career brought him to the Twin Cities, Herman quickly grew an affinity for Minnesota. Eventually retiring to Florida, Herman bought land outside of Marble, Minnesota so he had a special place to enjoy during the summer.

“It was a much different life than he’d led as a businessman,” says his son, Rob.

Preserving those outdoor experiences that mattered to him led Herman to generously donate two lots on North Twin Lake to the Minnesota Land Trust through his estate. Though Donald J. Herman left us in 2012, his gift to the Land Trust has created a legacy of conservation that will ensure natural places across our state are protected forever.

“WE’D GO UP TO VISIT IN THE SUMMERTIME, AND HE’D BE OUTSIDE CHOPPING WOOD, **JUST ENJOYING THE OUTDOORS.**”
—ROB HERMAN



MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

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ALL ACRES FOR OUR WATER

The Minnesota Land Trust, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, along with the Sauk River Watershed District and the Stearns County SWCD, is launching a pilot program to determine the extent to which water quality can be improved by using agricultural practices and conservation practices in combination. This program, All Acres for Our Water, focuses on the Sauk River watershed. A 2018 assessment of the watershed published by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency identified excess nutrients and bacteria as the primary stressors to water quality and aquatic habitat. This concerning trend — coupled with development, agricultural

runoff, and declining natural habitat — puts the Sauk River at serious risk.

We hope to demonstrate that a voluntary, non-regulatory approach can positively impact water quality — in particular, where farming is the predominant land use — by reducing nitrogen and phosphorus levels by 20% in portions of the river. This pilot program will evaluate how conservation easements can play a role in protecting the “whole farm,” including both the agriculture and the natural habitat on a given property, in order to benefit water quality.

FOR MORE INFO WWW.ACRESFORWATER.COM

> Our Saint Paul and Duluth offices are staffed with variable hours.
Please call in advance if you would like to visit.

MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

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