

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

January 27, 2020

Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park 42-Acre Bidwell Preserve, Burtchville Township, Saint Clair County

More good news. On January 3, the Consumers Energy Foundation awarded the TLC a grant of \$30,000 for the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project. We sincerely thank the foundation for sharing our vision. On a personal note, it is particularly gratifying to have the support of Consumers Energy. My father is a machinist and retired from their Marysville refinery. I even worked there in the summer of 1981, scraping and painting pipes. Back when they were Consumers Power, the CP symbol was very familiar, as was the occasional metal chip in the back door rug at our house.



On June 17, the TLC was awarded a \$150,000 matching grant from The Carls Foundation of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. This brings our fundraising total to about \$200,000, but we need your help to make that \$150,000 match and meet the purchase deadline for the 42-acre Bidwell Preserve by the end of July. Please consider contributing whatever amount you can to save this very important part of our local natural heritage by mailing a donation or by credit card through the secure PayPal link on our website: <http://www.thumbland.org/> Your donation will be a tax-deductible charitable contribution. By making a donation to help the TLC purchase this property, you will not only be helping to protect a very significant natural community in Michigan's Thumb, you will also be helping to protect land near your home, available for recreation, bird watching, education, and enjoyment of nature in a small coastal wilderness just north of Port Huron.

Beach Ridge and Swale Complex

A line of several preserves and parks currently extends along Lake Huron through Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships. The preserves are largely inaccessible to the public and somewhat disconnected from each other, but not by much. With a little effort, we are within reach of creating a continuous 4.5-mile coastal park and trail connecting the Port Huron area to Lakeport State Park. The proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park would encompass most of the remaining beach ridge (or dune) and swale complex along the eastern shoreline of Michigan's Thumb region. The beach ridge and swale complex is a formation of parallel sand ridges and muck wetlands deposited from about 4,500 years ago. This unique Great Lakes landscape is very limited in Michigan and now covers just a small part of Fort Gratiot and Burtchville Townships in Saint Clair County where it ranges from about a quarter-mile to a half-mile wide. It originally extended from the Blue Water Bridges into southern Sanilac County. The formation north of Port Huron is the most significant occurrence remaining from Ohio to the Saginaw Bay. The coastal forest habitat supports rare and uncommon species found in few other regions and is vital for migratory birds that move and nest along Lake Huron. Ongoing threats to the beach ridge and swale complex include residential and commercial development along the M-25 highway corridor, speculative land clearing and grading, forest fragmentation, sand mining, invasive weeds, overgrazing by deer, loss of forest canopy due to tree pests or diseases, and incursions by off-road vehicles.



The beach ridge and swale complex along Lake Huron is a big part of what makes the Blue Water Area unique and a desirable place to visit and live. At the same time, few understand the character and significance of this land because there is very limited public access to it. Routing a trail up through this coastal forest will provide a great opportunity for recreation, and as we say, a small coastal wilderness experience within just a few miles of Port Huron. The proposed coastal trail will increase safe pedestrian access to public parks, as opposed to access along road shoulders with traffic, noise, exhaust, and safety concerns. The Bidwell Preserve and proposed Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park will get people out in nature without having to travel across the state. The park will educate people about significant natural features where they live, not a few hundred miles away.

Loznak Sanctuary 11.5 Acres, City of Marysville

On December 18, the TLC accepted donation of the new 11.5-acre Loznak Sanctuary, along with a small endowment fund, from Loznak Real Estate Enterprises, LLC. The Loznak Sanctuary will honor the memory of Charles and Elizabeth Loznak. The sanctuary is located adjacent to an industrial area along Wills Street in Marysville, east of Busha Highway in Marysville.



Old-field with lakeplain prairie vegetation and the railroad spur beyond on the Loznak Sanctuary.

We were initially not enthusiastic about accepting the property because, based on aerial photographs and other information, the site appeared to be heavily impacted by previous industrial use connected with a World War II munitions factory and has a railroad spur running through the middle of it. However, upon walking the site, to our surprise, it is a nice recovering natural area with patches of young forest interspersed with the remains of concrete foundations reminiscent of monuments. Open ground on the east half of the sanctuary contains uncommon species like Riddell's Goldenrod - *Solidago riddellii*, Fringed Gentian - *Gentianopsis crinita*, and Mountain Mint - *Pycnanthemum virginianum*, indicating a likely remnant of lakeplain prairie. Historic aerial photographs and mapping show that, other than limited use of the property appearing to begin and end with World War II, the land appears to have been generally undisturbed. A 1937 aerial photograph shows the Loznak Sanctuary and vicinity was completely vacant and part of a large swath of mostly open land along the Saint Clair River which may have been farmed. We have found similar lakeplain prairie vegetation in the Marysville area where land use was not so intensive and fallow fields serve as refugia for plants remnant of original populations that existed prior to European settlement. Michigan Threatened Sullivant's Milkweed - *Asclepias sullivantii*, a rare lakeplain prairie plant found in only 8 southeast counties in Michigan, is known from several locations in the Marysville area.



Remnants of a concrete foundation amongst Paper Birch trees on the Loznak Sanctuary.

We are still in the process of discussing options and plans for this new sanctuary with potential partners, including the Port Huron and Detroit Railroad Historical Society (<http://phdrailroad.com/>). At this point, we envision the Loznak Sanctuary as a small park highlighting the interesting combination of natural area, World War II industrial history, and railroad history relating to the old Port Huron and Detroit Railroad, now owned by CSX Transportation, running along the west side of the sanctuary and the rail spur connecting to it. Our thanks again to attorney, Tim Lozen of Lozen and Kovar, PC in Port Huron (<http://www.lozenlaw.com/>) for making this donation happen.

Koester Conservation Easement 74 Acres, Fort Gratiot Township, Saint Clair County

The TLC has completed a baseline assessment and draft conservation easement for the new 74-acre Koester Conservation Easement in Fort Gratiot Township. The total amount of land within the conservation easement area is actually 84.6 acres, but about 10 acres is a county drain with a 100-foot wide right-of-way. We have reviewed the draft survey and now are just awaiting the final survey in order to finalize the conservation easement.



Plant communities across the Koester Conservation Easement.

The Koester Conservation Easement will protect a large area of relatively mature, non-fragmented southern swamp and hardwood-conifer swamp forest complex on seasonally inundated to moist sands with scattered upland knolls. Many of the native forest plant species are typically of a more northern distribution in Michigan, including Paper Birch, Eastern White Pine, Eastern Hemlock, Speckled Alder, Black Chokeberry, Meadowsweet, Low Sweet Blueberry, Dwarf Raspberry, Wintergreen, Goldthread, Canada Mayflower, Wild Sarsaparilla, Foamflower, Wood Anemone, Bracken Fern, Royal Fern, Northern Lady Fern, Ground-pine, and Ground-cedar. Likewise, there are species that are typically more southern, including Black Oak, Sassafras, Tulip Tree, and Spicebush. This sort of southern-meets-northern forest is characteristic of the Blue Water Area, a transitional vegetative region where nearby Lake Huron maintains cooler summers and warmer winters.

The south end of the parcel was partially logged in recent years but tree removal appears to have been limited largely to dead ash. The logging left a lot of deep tire ruts in the south end, but the forest plant community is still intact. While such disturbance is often excessive, we have seen interesting things happen after logging in similar swamp forest areas, like our Dead End Woods Sanctuary just over a mile southwest. That property was logged about 10 years prior to acquisition

by the Thumb Land Conservancy in 2008. While the log extraction was quite destructive, the ground still bearing deep tire ruts from heavy equipment, during our 2008 species survey, we found a few uncommon native plants that had not been observed in the Dead End Woods previously. These included Spikenard – *Aralia racemosa*, American Hazelnut – *Corylus americana*, and Cardinal Flower - *Lobelia cardinalis*, which all appeared to benefit from the moderate gaps in the forest canopy. There was also a very significant increase in Tulip Tree – *Liriodendron tulipifera* seedlings and saplings across much of the Dead End Woods. The increase of these plant species after forest cutting would not normally be surprising as they respond to increased light. But as some species were never seen before, or increased with such density from only a few trees, suggests that a seed or root bank was stimulated.



View across the south end of the Koester Conservation Easement.

The owners of the property, Darrin and Kim Koester, are constructing a single-family residence on only about 3 acres in the north end of the parcel on land that was cleared decades ago. This area is now partially wooded and dominated by planted pines along with very common or weedy species such as Apple, Black Cherry, hawthorn, Gray Dogwood, Autumn-olive, Common Buckthorn, Tartarian Honeysuckle, Common Blackberry, Late Goldenrod, Panicked Aster, and grasses. The TLC has encouraged the owners to remove invasive shrubs like buckthorn and honeysuckle and will assist them with management of the conservation easement in the future to improve the native forest community.

The conservation easement will allow the Koester's to afford the property taxes on this large parcel, which had not been sold for many years. Upon sale, the property taxes would have increased significantly and made the land unaffordable for the Koester's as a residence. The Fort Gratiot Tax Assessor was agreeable to reducing the taxes significantly in trade for a conservation easement on the majority of the parcel.

A conservation easement is one of the few ways that you can legally protect your land in perpetuity, basically as long as our legal system supports such easements. With a good land conservancy holding the easement, you can be assured that your property will remain protected

no matter the future ownership. Conservation easements, despite being called “easements” do not allow public access. A conservation easement is simply a legal agreement between a landowner and a conservancy or similar conservation group or agency. Most easements can be customized to allow uses that you and the conservancy agree upon. While most conservation easements are written to preserve natural areas and allow for passive uses and minor impacts such as trails, firewood cutting, and hunting, many easements also allow for farming, selective logging, or limited expansion of new buildings and other structures. Assessors are often not agreeable to reducing property taxes, so if you consider a conservation easement, you should consult with your local assessor if you are anticipating any tax abatement.

Beyond a conservation easement, the best way to protect nature on your land is to donate it to a conservancy. This can be done by will, or you can donate it now with a lifetime use provision. The TLC owns one preserve where the previous owner was granted a lifetime right to deer hunt on the property. If you have a natural area that you want to protect, please contact us.

TLC Member Profile

Mike Kubacki

This is a new section of our e-mail news where we introduce you to some of our conservancy members. If you would like to be featured, please send us a little about yourself and why you are interested in nature and land protection, along with a photo if you don't mind.

Mike Kubacki grew up on a dairy farm in Austin Township in Sanilac County and currently lives near the town of Ubyly. Mike has worked in road and bridge construction for 34 years, currently as a crane operator. As a kid, he loved to explore the woods and wetlands around his home. He often visited the Minden Bog in northern Sanilac County, one of the southern-most raised peat bogs in North America with a very unique northern plant community of sphagnum moss, low shrubs in the Heath Family, Bog Birch, and Tamarack. Gradually, Mike noticed that many of the natural places he knew were being destroyed. He was especially alarmed at the extensive peat mining of Minden Bog. These early experiences instilled in Mike a concern for nature, particularly for wetlands. Working across southeast Michigan, Mike sees a lot of wetland destruction and is very concerned for the future of our region. Mike and his wife, Carol, have 3 children and 7 grandchildren. They want their grandkids to be able to enjoy nature around them just as they have. Mike has been a member of the Thumb Land Conservancy for 5 years and has assisted us with Garlic Mustard pulls at our Dead End Woods Sanctuary among other activities. Thank you Mike.



Mike Kubacki and granddaughter Rachel with her 4-H project.

Ecology News

Trump Administration Cuts Back Federal Protections For Streams And Wetlands

<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/23/798809951/trump-administration-is-rolling-back-obama-era-protections-for-smaller-waterways>

The big news last week was the Trump administration's elimination of protections for vast amounts of wetlands and waterways across the US. Working as a professional wetland consultant for 30 years, I will tell you that wetland and stream regulations are far from perfect. But, this is a time when we should be increasing protection of these vital natural resources, not decreasing. Throwing responsibility for protections back at the states is mostly not going to work, and the Trump administration knows that. Michigan is one of only a few states to have their own wetland and stream protection regulations, and I don't expect that will change significantly. If anything, I expect that there will be a legislative effort in Michigan to follow suit with the federal reductions. I certainly don't have all the answers, but this isn't it. It's high time for those concerned about our environment to get together and work on a better way forward.

Scientists Alarmed By Massive Amounts Of Road Salt Used In The Northeast

<https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20191224/scientists-alarmed-by-massive-amounts-of-road-salt-used-in-northeast>

It's about time the ecological impact of road salt gets serious attention. Every time I drive over a salted slush-covered bridge, I wonder if anyone really cares. The one that really gets me is the M-24 crossing over the east end of Lake Orion. Much of the salt applied to roads eventually ends up in our waters and there's not much that can be done to remove it. Essentially, our modern road system is a 100-year experiment that has taken a huge toll on our environment. Road construction and maintenance requires huge amounts of sand, gravel, petroleum, and salt along with the destruction of vast natural areas to extract these materials. It's unsustainable to say the least. Another 100 years of road salt and sharks in the Great Lakes may not be as far-fetched as you might think.

2020 TLC Membership

With your membership, the TLC is better enabled to protect important natural areas in our region. We offer three membership levels as shown below: Individual \$25, Family \$30, and Business \$100. Members will receive our e-mail news. Some of you are members based on your previous donations, volunteer efforts, or other help. You can also make donations in honor or memory of someone or something. For donations of \$100 or more, your name will be listed on our web site. For larger donations, please contact us for details. You may print and complete the form below. Make checks payable to "Thumb Land Conservancy". Mail checks and forms to: Thumb Land Conservancy, 4975 Maple Valley Road, Marlette, Michigan 48453

To download and print the membership form, click [HERE](#).

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