



# OUR OHIO NATURE

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

## Conservation Burns Bright

RETURNING FIRE TO TNC'S LANDS IN OHIO

Donning bright yellow safety gear, Nature Conservancy staff in Michigan welcomed staff from Ohio to Ives Road Fen Preserve, about 40 miles northwest of Toledo, last December. The team, led by a certified burn boss and staffed by experienced fire practitioners, gathered for a briefing that outlined the goals of the prescribed fire that would be set later that morning. The area chosen for the burn was carefully assessed, accounting for weather and wind conditions, and the team revisited the burn plan that had been set in motion months earlier.

Restoration staff have been managing Ives Road Fen Preserve to improve and protect the globally significant prairie fen habitat, a rare wetland system formed over thousands of years that relies on groundwater input. December's prescribed burn offered an important natural disturbance on which these ecosystems have relied for countless generations as a means of removing dead vegetation and clearing the area so that native wildflowers and trees can be planted to support the many wildlife that dwell here.

Once the plan was set, the team moved into action. Armed with drip torches, hand tools and water tanks, trained burn crew members set small flames along the perimeter of the designated burn area. The initial crackle of fire ignited the beginning of a carefully choreographed fire that would soon unfold across the landscape.

These burns, and the many that will follow, mark a continuation of the landscape stewardship practices initiated by Indigenous Tribes millennia ago, stewardship practices that shaped the land and carved the way for a multitude of species that would come to depend on the disturbance for survival.

While disturbance is often seen as negative, ecosystem disturbances are necessary in restoring and maintaining the health and diversity of ecosystems across the Midwest. These events, which can range from naturally occurring windstorms and lightning strikes to human activities like selective thinning, mowing and prescribed fire, introduce

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Bill Stanley

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# Director's Message



As you read the stories in this issue, I encourage you to think about the place of people in nature. Even as technology continues to change the ways that our species interacts with others, humans play ever more important roles in well-functioning and diverse ecosystems. As conservationists, our job is to lead people and societies to a path where we promote the health of ecosystems, and away from one that results in degradation and destruction.

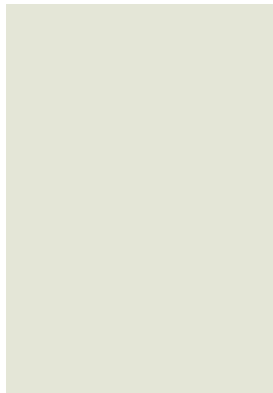
Stewardship isn't just a scientific calling. Every major religion includes references to the sacredness of nature, and some offer guidance to act as stewards of the planet. How this is conveyed varies, but the overall message that

many draw from this is that if we care for nature, it will take care of us.

Indigenous philosophies also succeed in seeing humans as part of nature rather than distinct from it. As you read about our work on fire, consider this perspective. Just as each part of an ecosystem has a role in supporting the functioning of the whole, so do humans. Many species flourished in Ohio not despite, but because of, the historical management of the lands and fires set by Indigenous Peoples. By ceasing to periodically introduce fire to the land, we inadvertently removed a key element of the ecosystem, and many species suffered. We're working to change that.

In her book, *Braiding Sweet Grass*, the Potawatomi author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer shares an idea that she refers to as reciprocity. She quotes scientist E.O. Wilson who writes, "There can be no purpose more inspiring than to begin the age of restoration, reweaving the wondrous diversity of life that still surrounds us." This is followed by religious scholar and author Joanna Macy who extends this thought by adding, "Because the relationship between self and world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us."

In this issue, you will enjoy learning more about the work we are doing—with your help—to heal the earth. And I hope that it will bring you, as it brings me, a measure of joy and hopefulness.



COVER A fire practitioner uses a drip torch to ignite a controlled burn at Kitty Todd Nature Preserve. © Alex Goetz/Running Wild Media; THIS PAGE Bill Stanley © David Ike; Snake balance beam at the Grand River Conservation Campus © Ann Gilmore/TNC (see story page 5)

variability and change into a wide range of ecosystems, promoting ecological diversity and preventing conversion to undesirable conditions like overabundance of a single plant species in an area.

Fire plays an almost paradoxical role on the landscape. On one hand, its flames can be a force of destruction. Yet, within its destructive grip lies a story of regeneration. When thoughtfully curated, fire can be transformative, fostering rebirth and renewal by helping to clear out underbrush, create open habitats that support a myriad of plants and wildlife and promote ecological resiliency.

Unfortunately, the arrival of European colonists created a profound shift in the use of fire on lands throughout the Midwest and beyond; fire suppression became the new norm as agencies sought to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic fires. As a result, the landscape began to change as fire-adapted and fire-dependent ecosystems became degraded or increasingly rare. This shift had unintended and detrimental consequences for natural areas in Ohio.

Without regular fires, habitats, like the open prairies of northwest Ohio's Oak Openings region and the forested foothills of southern Ohio became overgrown as natural succession and invasive species took over. Biodiversity suffered as specialized, fire-adapted species struggled to thrive and regenerate. And the overall health and resilience of ecosystems declined.

Until March 2024, fire hadn't been seen on lands that TNC stewards in Ohio since 2019. But conservation staff across the state have supported controlled burns on TNC lands in neighboring states for years, providing critical training opportunities for Ohio staff and helping to support the landscape management plans in a "One Conservancy" model.

"The burn at Ives Road Fen was a great opportunity to collaborate with our Midwest colleagues and to provide our staff in Ohio more experience on



prescribed burns," says Pete Blank, northwest Ohio restoration manager. "This is also good experience for our staff as we prepare to get fire back on our TNC-managed lands in Ohio."

### Returning Fire to TNC's Lands in Ohio

Marked by prairie and savanna habitat, the Oak Openings Region in northwest Ohio is home to one-third of the state's endangered and threatened plants. Fire plays a crucial role in protecting the dynamic balance between grasses and woody plants, ensuring the survival of a diverse array of plant and animal species that are adapted to these fire-dependent landscapes by helping to maintain the area's open, sandy habitats. Rare prairie plants, like yellow false indigo, Skinner's foxglove, grass pink orchid, colicroot, scaly blazing star and wild lupine all benefit from the disturbance fire provides to the landscape.

Fire also helps to support the habitat needed for rare butterflies and moths, including the state-endangered blazing star borer moth, as well as rare birds like the lark sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, red-headed woodpecker and northern harrier at TNC's Kitty Todd Nature Preserve, nestled in the Oak Openings Region.

But prairies aren't the only ecosystem in Ohio that benefits from controlled burning.

In southern Ohio's Appalachian region, controlled burns clear away accumulated debris and invasive species, rejuvenating the forest floor and creating a canvas for the growth of native flora. Fire is used alongside other anthropogenic disturbances like mowing and mulching to maintain and restore TNC's Richard and Lucile Durrell Edge of Appalachia Preserve's xeric limestone prairies and warm season grasslands. These habitats support migratory birds like Henslow's sparrow and meadowlarks, more than 100 rare and threatened plant species, and numerous insects, reptiles and other wildlife.

Fire also benefits the preserve's oak-hickory forests by increasing sunlight to the forest floor and promoting the seed germination of these keystone species. Dominated by mature oaks, these hardwood forest ecosystems provide a rich tapestry of plant and animal life due to their complex structure and diverse understory. Controlled burning can help to reduce competition from shade-tolerant species such as red maple, yellow poplar and white pine, which lack fire adaptations like thick, protective bark or other traits that have become more common in the absence of fire.



Earlier this year, TNC returned fire to Kitty Todd Nature Preserve. We plan to conduct controlled burns at Edge of Appalachia in spring as a critical part of the larger ecosystem management plan that protects rare and endangered species. **LEARN MORE** about how controlled burns benefit Ohio's ecosystems by visiting [nature.org/ohiofire](https://nature.org/ohiofire).



# Ohio Mitigation Program Celebrates 10 Years



BY LISS WHITING, TNC Conservation Coordinator

At Rialto Marsh, pioneering grasses and saplings are just starting to take root. But if you close your eyes, you can imagine how it once looked: abundant sedges, the trill of birds and insects, a ceiling of sycamores and elms, and the rich scent of wet earth wafting through the trees. This is how the Rialto Marsh property may have looked 200 years ago.

Like much of Ohio, Rialto Marsh was once covered in wetlands. When the greater Cincinnati area was taken by colonists, large swaths of land were cleared for agriculture, and farmers built up berms around the Mill Creek to prevent it from flooding their fields, a fate seen by many of Ohio's original wetlands.

In a state that has lost 90% or more of its original wetlands, good mitigation is critical to avoid, minimize and offset harm to streams and wetlands at the hands of development. That's where the Ohio Mitigation Program (OMP) is helping. The OMP consolidates money from many small, permitted impacts to streams and wetlands and uses these resources to design and implement high-quality restoration projects.

In the 10 years since the program's initiation in 2014, the OMP has restored 7.2 miles of stream and 155 acres of wetlands through 17 projects, with more than 23 additional restoration projects in various stages of implementation or evaluation.

The Nature Conservancy, along with West Chester Township, which owns the 40-acre site, knew that restoring Rialto Marsh would provide a significant ecological lift in an urban

setting. We shared a vision of renewing the land and protecting it for generations to come. An important benefit of this urban project is that it reconnects the Mill Creek (named in 1996 as the most endangered urban river in the United States) with a significant piece of its floodplain, relieving pressure during high rain events and reducing the likelihood of downstream flooding in an area with a history of devastating flood events.

Working around powerline easements, utility lines and the railroad tracks, TNC worked with an engineering consultant to remove drainage tiles and invasive species from the property, recontour the stream back to a natural flow, dig shallow wetland pools and plant nearly 12,000 native trees and shrubs, which will shade the stream corridor and provide important forest wetland habitat for wildlife. While initial construction is complete, TNC will continue to monitor and maintain Rialto's streams, wetlands and plant diversity to ensure that project standards are being met over the next 10 years.



TO LEARN MORE about the Ohio Mitigation Program and recently completed restoration projects, visit [nature.org/omp](https://www.nature.org/omp).

## *Tree Nut Collection a Success*

Last fall, we invited volunteers to collect and donate tree nuts to our Ohio Mitigation Program to help us in our reforestation efforts. The OMP team sowed hundreds of donated black walnuts, buckeyes, and pin, shingle, and red oak acorns at the Rialto Marsh restoration site, helping bolster reforestation efforts at the site. We thank everyone who helped to make this opportunity a roaring success!

# A Continued Legacy of Nature Education

More than 60 years ago, when The Nature Conservancy's work was taking root in southern Ohio, families and youth campers were enjoying all that nature had to offer in the far northeast corner of the state at Camp Vladek, a summer nature retreat and children's camp in Ashtabula County. While it would have been nearly impossible to predict the future of the camp, it seems as though the landscape was fated to be an oasis of learning and outdoor play that would come to serve many generations. Today, the area is known as the Grand River Conservation Campus, located at TNC's Morgan Swamp Preserve.

"This land has served many people over the years," says Marcel Weigand, northeast Ohio conservation coordinator. "While early colonists farmed the land, it then became a private hunting retreat around the turn of the 20th century and eventually emerged as a summer camp and retreat for Jewish and later Christian communities." In 2011, TNC acquired the campus through a generous donation from Cleveland-based City Mission. The acquisition expanded the Morgan Swamp Preserve by nearly 60 acres and increased protection efforts along the state Wild and Scenic Grand River, while providing space for nature education to the neighboring community.

"We're proud to continue a legacy of connecting people to nature by providing a living classroom for students, educators and families to learn about rare ecosystems and endangered species," says Weigand. "Visitors can enjoy exploring the Dr. James K. Bissell Nature Center on weekends from April through October, then step outside into nature where they can see many of the things they learned about through our programming."

While it's been more than 60 years since youth campers enjoyed their summer retreat at Camp Vladek, their memories of time spent exploring nature haven't faded. For the last few years, TNC staff have collaborated with former Camp Vladek campers to host an annual reunion to visit the campus.

"The first time I returned to the camp, I cried and cried in disbelief that it was still standing," says Peggy Shecket, a former camper whose family enjoyed spending summer afternoons at the nature retreat in the 1950s. "I'm thrilled to know that the camp will continue to provide nature experiences for generations to come."



## GRCC Sees Upgrades Including New Nature Play Area

The Grand River Conservation Campus at Morgan Swamp Preserve saw many upgrades in 2023, thanks in large part to Capital Bill funding. Last fall, a 3,000-lb. wood-carved eastern massasauga rattlesnake head was installed, completing the new Nature Play Area located between the Bissell Nature Center and Bliss Pond. The snake head was chainsaw-carved by a local artist using a large tree trunk and completes the snake body balance beam constructed of logs and boulders. This spring, musical instruments were added to the Nature Play Area, providing another opportunity to engage the local community, including the many children who visit from neighboring schools.

We invite you and your families to experience the new nature playground, walk the preserve trails and explore all the amenities the Campus and preserve have to offer.

# Photographers Capture the Beauty of Ohio

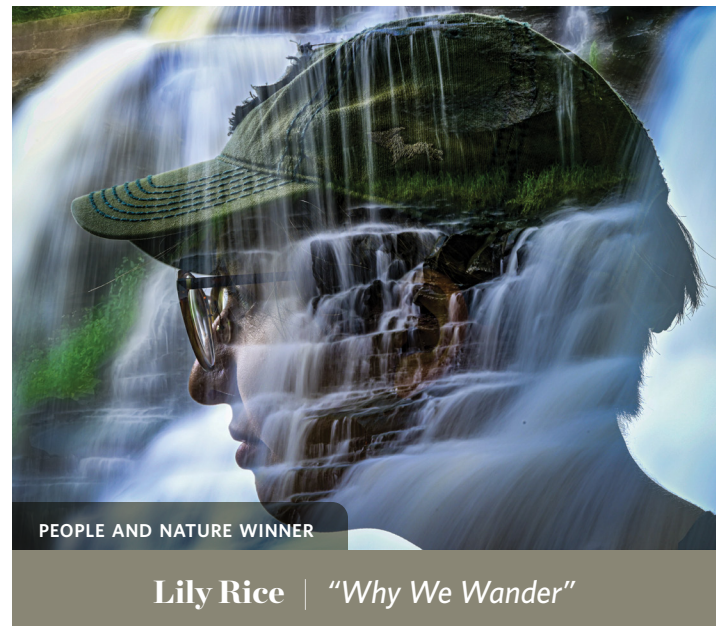
*in The Nature Conservancy's 2023 Photo Contest*

Last fall, Ohio was one of three states that awarded local prizes as part of The Nature Conservancy's global photo contest. We were thrilled to see more than 6,000 images of Ohio nature submitted from more than 2,200 photographers from all corners of the state.

“Seeing the beautiful images has reaffirmed for me that nature’s magnificence comes in all shapes, sizes and locations, and importantly, that our efforts to protect it are more urgent than ever. Thank you to everyone who submitted images and

shared your stunning views of Ohio. Your contributions will help us tell the story of Ohio’s heritage and what’s at stake as we work toward a sustainable future for all,” says Bill Stanley, state director for TNC in Ohio.

Judges for the local 2023 Photo Contest included Coyote Peterson, Emmy award-winning host of *Brave Wilderness*; Jeni Britton, founder of Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams; Alexis Nikole Nelson (aka BlackForager), an American forager and internet personality; and TNC staff.





# 5 Summer Road Trips to TNC's Midwest Preserves

You don't have to travel far to get away from it all. Across the Midwest, TNC preserves offer a nature respite—and opportunities for outdoor adventures. Plan your visit at [nature.org/preserves](https://www.nature.org/preserves).

## 1 Bird Watching

Pack your binoculars to catch a glimpse of waterfowl, warblers and other feathered friends as they travel along the Mississippi Flyway, an important migration corridor.

**CHECK OUT →**

Ohio's Great Egret Marsh Preserve along the Lake Erie coast.

## 2 Hiking

TNC preserves across the region offer a range of trails and difficulty levels, from easy strolls to steep climbs.

**CHECK OUT →**

Central Indiana's Green's Bluff Nature Preserve, which features rocky bluffs and brand-new hiking trails designed and installed by the Hoosier Hikers Council, a local volunteer group.

## 3 Geocaching

Embark on a treasure hunt, following online clues and coordinates to find hidden containers, or geocaches. Sign up at [geocaching.com](https://www.geocaching.com).

**CHECK OUT →**

Mary Macdonald Preserve at Horseshoe Harbor in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. On the drive there, listen to an online audio tour about the unique history that shaped this preserve.

## 4 Paddling and Fishing

Whether in a canoe, kayak or other non-motorized boat, paddling offers stunning views of coastline habitat, as well as the opportunity to spot wildlife that hunt, swim and nest offshore.

**CHECK OUT →**

Wisconsin's Caroline Lake Preserve at the headwaters of the Bad River. You can also cast a line in the lake's clear waters.

## 5 Watch Bison Roam

Until recently, you had to travel to Wyoming or other western states to see wild bison roaming. Today, you can see these giant mammals—which weigh 1,000 to 2,000 pounds—in Illinois and Indiana.

**CHECK OUT →**

Nachusa Grasslands in Illinois or Kankakee Sands in Indiana.



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### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

More than 6,000 photos were entered into The Nature Conservancy's 2023 global photo contest from Ohio. Check out the images that our celebrity judges awarded for grand prize and category winners in this issue of *Our Ohio Nature*.