

# Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Partnership 2011 Annual Report

**I. Introduction:** In December of 2007 a coalition of conservationists formulated a sub-regional implementation plan for the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan's Hill Prairie Corridor and Karst Sinkhole Plain Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs). Taken together, the two COAs comprise a 130,000-acre contiguous corridor in Southwestern Illinois.

The Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (SWIWAP) establishes definitive implementation goals and guidelines, serves USDA's Locally Led Conservation Initiative, and sustains the vision of the Monroe County Comprehensive Plan to protect the largest geographical extent of the corridor.

Principal SWIWAP Partners include: the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Illinois Speleological Survey (ISS), the University of Illinois Extension Service, the Heartlands Conservancy (formerly Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation & Development Inc), the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS), the Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society (KVAS), the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), the Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves, the Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve Stewardship Committee, and Clifftop. Clifftop serves as the Partnership's administrative agent.

The SWIWAP Partnership met again, for its fifth time, on December 14th, 2011. This report of the meeting highlights the current status of conservation in the corridor, details the significant actions accomplished during 2011, and refines timelines and divisions of labor for out-year SWIWAP Partnership efforts.

## **II. Summary of Protected Land in the Corridor:**

- IDNR manages 2152 state-owned acres.
- INPC manages 1794 acres of privately owned land enrolled, in perpetuity, in INPC programs. In addition, 276 privately owned acres are enrolled in shorter-term, renewable easements.
- The Land Conservancy holds donated conservation easements on 108 acres in the corridor.
- 897 privately owned acres are enrolled in USDA's Wetland Reserve Program and are protected in perpetuity (though not within the COA boundaries, this Mississippi River bottomlands area and the Hill Prairie Corridor are linked ecotones and provide significant breeding/wintering grounds for herpetofauna).

- In total, 4951 acres in the corridor and adjacent wetlands are afforded a permanently protected status.
- Hypothetical protection is afforded 11,197 acres of IEPA designated Class III groundwater areas.

### **III. Future for Land Protection:**

The State's budgetary crisis has catalyzed a drastic reduction of state revenues for land acquisition. New roles for local nonprofit conservation and land trust organizations are necessary to help with the purchase or donation of development rights and fee simple acquisition of lands of important conservation value in the corridor. The SWIWAP Partnership completed a strategic land conservation and protection plan in 2009 for the corridor that will aid in the selection and prioritization of tracts for enhanced outreach efforts to landowners for stewardship and permanent protection. The SWIWAP Partnership will continue to work with landowners to encourage enrollment in protective conservation easement programs.

### **IV. SWIWAP Goals 1 & 2: Protect, manage and preserve existing wooded habitat, hill prairies and glades. Increase wooded acres by 3500 acres. Increase hill prairie acreage to historical boundaries.**

In keeping with SWIWAP Partnership objectives to protect additional high-quality natural areas in COA, the Clifftop-Heartlands Conservancy joint owned White Rock tracts were enrolled as a Land & Water Reserve (169 acres) and a Nature Preserve (306 acres) in 2011, adding 475 protected acres to the COA.

A Heartlands Conservancy purchased 100 acre wetland tract adjacent to Kidd Lake Marsh State Natural Area was conveyed to IDNR in 2011, adding an additional 100 protected acres to the COA.

Stewardship and management to enhance and restore natural communities is equally important. The majority of acreage within the COA remains in private ownership; therefore, efforts to enhance stewardship and management on private acreage as well as on acreage enrolled in permanent protection programs remain vital components of the Partnership's overall strategy. Increasing enrollment of landowners in cost-share programs, participation in stewardship and management programs and restoration efforts remain ongoing activities.

### **Collective noteworthy stewardship multi-year contracts from 2009 through 2011 included:**

- 52 contracts on 2334 private-/village-owned acres totaling \$402,825 in cost-sharing incentives through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative--a special focus area program for EQIP and WHIP funds
- 6 contracts on 409 privately owned acres totaling \$196,350 in cost-share incentives to landowners through USFWS'/IDNR's Landowner Incentive Program.
- \$144,499 in contract services for habitat improvements on 8 sites, within a 2000-acre project area, through a State Wildlife Grant, administered by IDNR.
- \$41,015 of IDNR funds for contract services on state-managed lands in the COA
- \$17,684 in Forest Development Act (IDNR) cost-share incentives to landowners

**Totaling: \$802,373 (Life of Contract dollars)**

- Currently, 70 landholders have enrolled 3289 acres of woodlands in the Forest Development Act forestland improvement stewardship programs. Some of the EQIP funds detailed above were dedicated to such forest improvements.

Stewardship activities in the COA in 2011 included invasive species control, hill prairie and limestone glade restoration, trail maintenance and development, nature preserve infrastructure development, prescribed burning, and native seed collection.

**Stewardship hours in the COA in 2011 included:**

- IDNR - 169 hours
  - INPC - 630 hours
  - Contractors - 1208 hours
  - Clifftop - 2505 volunteer hours
  - Salt Lick Point Committee - 1602 volunteer hours
  - Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves - 165 volunteer hours
- Total: 6282 hours

A Volunteer Stewardship Training Guide was developed by the partnership in 2011. A concerted, focused honeysuckle campaign is merited for the corridor. See Section X below.

Stemler Cave Woods Nature Preserve has the greatest infestation of bush honeysuckle of any state-managed lands in the corridor. For several years state and volunteer efforts have focused on the problem and will continue. See Section X below.

## **V. SWIWAP Goal 3: Restore and maintain wetlands:**

Wetland areas near the corridor on the Mississippi's flood plain have ecological and hydrological underpinnings in the bluffs. They serve as important herpetological breeding areas for species that winter in the bluffs, and are important habitat for avifauna. As such, the SWIWAP addresses the need for their stewardship.

Extant wetland areas were drained by the early 1900s, and are currently under restoration. Many now serve as waterfowl hunting clubs. Wetland owners have enrolled 897 acres in USDA's Wetland Reserve Program. The Kidd Lake Marsh State Natural Area accounts for 544 additional protected acres.

At the local level, an informal affiliation of waterfowl hunting club owners, "The Friends of Kidd Lake," is working together to insure the long-term sustainability of the wetlands. At the regional level, the Middle Mississippi River Partnership (MMRP), a much larger scale organization of governmental and non-governmental entities, for which the Heartlands Conservancy serves as administrative agent, is addressing wetland vitality, restoration and maintenance, throughout the Mississippi's flood plain, from the confluence of the Illinois River to the confluence of the Ohio River.

Bluff Road, a well-trafficked county highway, demarcates the ecotone between bottomland wetlands and the bluffs' talus slope. During the migration of herpetofauna across the highway, significant road kill occurs. A study is necessary to determine if mitigation measures are possible. See Section X below.

## **VI. SWIWAP Goal 4: Increase karst protection:**

Bringing definition and a realistic suite of achievable objectives to increase karst protection is challenging. The large geographic recharge areas of the sinkhole plain overlap political, jurisdictional and regulatory boundaries. The Illinois Department of Public Health has regulatory authority over residential well construction and onsite sewage systems. The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has regulatory authority for Class III groundwater, landfills, and municipal sewage treatment. The Monroe, St. Clair and Randolph County governments and various municipal authorities legislate karst protective ordinances, but conform to no set of standards in issuing variances.

The ability to define and refine criteria for permanent land protection in karst areas and to ensure increased sustainability of karst fauna populations through permanent land protection or other methodologies remains a Partnership concern. Philip Moss has

drafted a potential blueprint for karst protection. It will be used as a basis for expanded discussions with the karst science community. See Section X.

**VII. SWIWAP Goal 5: Encourage landholders and policy makers to adopt sound land and wildlife management practices.**

Public information / outreach programs in 2011, focused on conservation and stewardship, included:

- January: “Living on the Land: Agricultural Land Management” Seminar (Extension Service)
- January: “Agriculture, Horticulture, Natural Resources News and Events” Newsletter (Extension Service)
- February: Soil and Water Management Seminar (Extension Service)
- February: Prescribed Burn Workshop (Clifftop)
- March: Growing with Natives Presentation (Clifftop)
- April: Salt Lick Wildflower Hike (all SWIWAP partners)
- April: Monroe County 5th Grade Conservation Days (Extension Service & SWCD)
- April: INAI Update Presentation (KVAS)
  
- May: Festival of the Bluffs & BioBlitz (all SWIWAP partners)
- May: “Invasive Trees and Shrubs” telnet (Extension Service)
- June: KVAS Nature Festival (KVAS)
- June-August: Included native plant and soil education as a component of Junior Master Gardener Summer Day Camp (Extension Service)
- October: “Invasive Weeds” telnet (Extension Service)
- October: IWAP / SWIWAP Presentation (Clifftop & KVAS)
- November: Salt Lick Invasive Species Workshop
- November: Stemler Invasive Species Workshop
- November: Birds of Monroe County Presentation (KVAS)
- Cliffnotes monthly newspaper series and newsletter, BluffViews (Clifftop)

### **VIII. SWIWAP Goal 6: Improve and expand science-based evaluation, monitoring and research:**

A bio-diversity database for the bluff corridor has been established and is posted at [www.clifftopalliance.org](http://www.clifftopalliance.org). IDNR / INPC staff, scientists and academics, and citizen science volunteers are conducting bird, plant, mammal, butterfly, and herpetofaunal natural history surveys. The database is updated annually on the web site, in February of each year. In addition, SWIWAP partners submit "Element of Occurrence Reports" (EORs) to IDNR for observations of threatened & endangered species; Clifftop manages a Christmas Bird Count (CBC) for National Audubon Society in the COA; an Illinois Spring Bird Count (SBC) is conducted in the COA; and routine seasonal field notes are submitted to the Illinois Ornithological Society.

In 2011, 1012 hours were dedicated to conducting natural history surveys in the COA.

The following significant research was conducted in the COA in 2011:

- Fifty-one scientists and naturalists conducted a 24-hour BioBlitz at Salt Lick Point Land & Water Reserve on 14 & 15 May 2011. The BioBlitz was funded by grants from the Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund and the Volunteer Stewardship Network. 1093 species were observed, including 8 state-listed and one first state record.
- "Best Land Management Practices for Amphibian Habitat in Sinkhole Ponds" was completed. The study, by a SIU-C graduate student, was funded by an NGRREC grant; Bob Weck, SWIC faculty member, oversaw the project.
- A multi-year entomological study at Fults Hill Prairie NP began in 2010. SEMO's Dr. Diane Wood and a graduate student are conducting the SWG-funded research.
- Floristic study of limestone glades in the COA, a two-three year study begun, by Bill McClain & Dr. John Ebinger, EIU emeritus.
- Stemler Cave mapping (2393 additional ft), ISS
- Baseline monitoring & molecular characterizations of state endangered Enigmatic Cavesnail (*Fontigens antroecetes*), ongoing, by Bob Weck, ISS, and Dr. Steve Taylor, Marlis Douglas and Jeremy Tiemann, INHS

- Hill prairie soil microbe multi-year study, at 12 prairies in the COA, by University of Illinois' Dr. Tony Yannerell and a grad student; NGRREC funded.
- White Mine habitat transformation study by INHS (Dr Steve Taylor), IDNR (Joe Kath) and ISS (Philip Moss)
- Barn Owl Recovery Program. Seven nest boxes installed in the COA in 2011.

We need to continue to encourage universities to conduct natural history-related research projects in the corridor. See Section X below.

**IX. SWIWAP Goal 7: Seek resources and funding to implement goals:**

All SWIWAP WG partners will continue to seek grants and funds to continue stewardship, acquisition, and information-outreach programs.

**X. Action Items:**

1. Continue to eradicate bush honeysuckle at Stemler Nature Preserves. Tasked: IDNR Deadline: December, 2012
2. Develop "Invasive Species Campaign" protocols for the COA. Tasked: INPC Deadline: December 2012
5. Continue to expand academic research in the COA. Tasked: All partners
6. Determine best practices to limit hepetafaunal road kill along Bluff Road. Tasked: Clifftop Deadline: December 2012
8. Develop a blueprint of concerted, doable, prioritized objectives and actions for increasing karst protection. Tasked: Clifftop Deadline: December 2012
9. Develop purchased easement policy guidelines. Tasked: HeartLands Conservancy & Clifftop Deadline: December 2012
10. Explore feasibility of hosting a conference for USF&WS' 10-year review of the Illinois Cave Amphipod Recovery Plan Tasked: ISS, Philip Moss; and, a 2013 Illinois Academy of Sciences conference on the biology of Southwestern Illinois Tasked: ISS, Bob Weck Deadlines: December, 2012

**XI. Administration:** The next meeting of the SWIWAP Partnership will be in December 2012. A listing of partnership members is attached.

### SWIWAP Partnership Listing

ORGANIZATION	POINT-of-CONTACT	E-MAIL
IDNR	Mike Moomey Martin Kemper Mark Brown	Mike.moomey@illinois.gov Martin.kemper@illinois.gov Mark.v.brown@illinois.gov
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Heartlands Conservancy	Dave Eustis	Dave.eustis@swircd.org
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KVAS	Tim Dever	Coltond98@sbcglobal.net
Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves	Bob Weck	bnweck@htc.net
Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee	Rich Dependahl	saltlick@htc.net
NWTF	Kent Adams	kadamsrb@nwtf.net
Clifftop	Carl or Pen Daubach	clifftop@htc.net