

## **Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Working Group 2008 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 60,000-acre contiguous corridor in Southwestern Illinois.

The Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan (SWIWAP) establishes definitive implementation goals and guidelines, serves the 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.

The following stakeholder and partnering agencies and entities constitute the SWIWAP Working Group (WG): Clifftop, Ducks Unlimited, Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves, Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC), Illinois Native Plant Society, Illinois Speleological Survey, Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society, Monroe – Randolph Bi-County Health Department, Monroe County Farm Bureau, Monroe County Regional Planning Commission, Monroe and Randolph County Soil and Water Conservation Districts, North American Butterfly Association, National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), National Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, Regional Office of Education, Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Southern Regional Groundwater Planning Committee, Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation & Development Inc. (SWI RC&D), The Land Conservancy, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, and University of Illinois Extension Service.

The SWIWAP WG met again in December 2008. This report of the meeting highlights the current status of conservation in the corridor, details the significant actions accomplished during 2008, and refines timelines and divisions of labor for out-year SWIWAP WG efforts.

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

- IDNR manages 1892 state-owned acres, 164 of these acres were acquired in 2008.
- INPC manages 1319 acres of privately owned land, enrolled, in perpetuity, in INPC programs. 145 of these acres were enrolled in 2008. In addition, 741 privately owned acres, are temporarily enrolled.
- The Nature Conservancy acquired 160 acres in 2008.
- The Land Conservancy holds donated conservation easements on 108 acres in the corridor; 93 of the acres were donated in 2008.
- 897 privately owned acres are enrolled in USDA's Wetland Reserve Program and are protected in perpetuity.

- In total, 5117 acres in the corridor are afforded a protected status.

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

The State's budgetary crisis has catalyzed a drastic reduction of state revenues for land acquisition. Funding sources for the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Fund, the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund, and C-2000 Ecosystem Program funds have been diverted to general revenue requirements.

New roles for local nonprofit conservation and land trust organizations are necessary to help with the purchase of development rights and fee simple acquisition of lands of important conservation value in the corridor. A strategic land protection plan for the corridor is merited. See Section X below.

INPC, The Land Conservancy and Clifftop will continue to work with landowners to encourage enrollment in protective, conservation easement programs.

Proposed Illinois farmland protection legislation (Senate Bill 1992) failed enactment in the Illinois Senate this year. It will be reintroduced in spring 2009. If enacted, each county will have the authority to set aside tax revenues for farmland protection.

### **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.**

Permanent protection efforts for forest, prairie and glades are addressed above. Expanding hill prairie acreage can be accomplished through landowner enrollment in INPC programs or fee simple acquisition of parcels, with follow-on restoration actions. Increasing wooded acreage can be accomplished through landowner cost-sharing incentive programs, or parcel acquisition with follow-on reforestation / afforestation programs.

Collective noteworthy stewardship activities in 2008 included:

- 22 contracts on 1123 acres totaling \$217,056 in cost-sharing incentives to landowners in USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.
- 7 contracts in works on 230 acres totaling \$32,362 in cost-sharing incentives to landowners in USFWS' Landowner Incentive Program.
- \$115,000 in contract services for habitat improvements on 8 sites, within a 2000-acre project area, through a State Wildlife Grant, administered by IDNR. IDNR / INPC completed site surveys, GPS assessments, and management plans prior to commencement of contract operations.
- 84 landholders enrolled 4100 acres of woodlands in Forest Development Act stewardship programs.

- 3 contracts for invasive control, totaling \$8500 in IDNR / INPC funds, on 3 sites (31 acres).
- IDNR / INPC conducted 5 prescribed burns, totaling 70 acres, on two state and 3 privately owned sites.
- IDNR / INPC monitored and applied herbicides on new occurrences of garlic mustard and kudzu at 5 new sites.
- IDNR / INPC collected, with the help of Clifftop and Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee volunteers, large quantities of native plant seeds in the Hill Prairie Corridor for use in overall restoration efforts.
- \$20,000 in INPC funding for contract safety fencing at Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve.
- \$25,000 grant from the National Wild Turkey Federation for Landowner Incentive Program future contracts.
- Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves contributed 200 volunteer hours to site maintenance, sinkhole cleanup, invasive controls, and a 5-acre prescribed burn.
- The Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee contributed 750 volunteer hours to site maintenance, invasive controls, seed collection, and preparation for prescribed burns.
- Clifftop contributed 402 volunteer hours assisting IDNR / INPC with prescribed burns, seed collection, and invasive controls; and, contributed 160 hours helping private landowners with invasive controls and 7 prescribed burns totaling 25 acres.

Illinois' Conservation Stewardship Program (the woodlands tax) requires landowners to develop stewardship management plans to be eligible for lower tax assessments on wooded properties. Such plans are not difficult, and several SWIWAP WG partners can assist landowners in their development. See Section X below.

Shortages in State funds for private landowner stewardship projects and the impending loss of Landowner Incentive Program funds in the Farm Bill require garnering cost sharing incentives from other resources. USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program could be a highly effective program for landholders to improve wildlife habitat and timber stand management in the corridor. See Section X below.

The Illinois Conservation and Climate Initiative's new "Managed Forest Carbon Offset and Trading Program" bodes well to incentivize landowner improvements in forest management. Current application guidelines and requirements need clarification. See Section X below.

Volunteer stewardship groups in the corridor could benefit from further training. See Section X below.

U.S. Congress is working on an economic stimulus package that will include "green infrastructure" and "green jobs" components. The SWIWAP WG approved drafting a

proposal for Representative Costello and Senator Durbin for a \$13M special program to fund stewardship projects in the corridor. The letters were sent on 24 December 08.

### **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 444 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, 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.

The MMRP, however, has not attempted any stewardship projects in our area of the flood plain (Reach 2). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MMRP's lead agency for Reach 2, informed us that the lack of public-owned lands in the bottoms, coupled to the high cost of bottomland farmland, has precluded any initiatives in our area. Nonetheless, the SWIWAP WG believes that further exploration of the feasibility of potential projects is merited. See Section X below.

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.

Sinkhole ponds, abundant in the corridor, also constitute important breeding habitats for a diverse variety of amphibians. Information outreach on best practices to maintain sinkhole pond habitats is merited. See Section X below.

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

A karst outreach-educator is required to spearhead information on "living with karst" to the public and policy makers. See Section X below.

The Monroe-Randolph Bi-County Health Department has commenced a GPS inventory of all septic systems in the area. Inspections of septic systems will follow.

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

The Monroe County Commissioners have incorporated the SWIWAP Working Group's proceedings into the county's comprehensive planning process, enabling an informational cross-flow in the interests of blufflands conservation.

Key information / outreach programs, focused on conservation and stewardship, during 2008 included:

- A Clifftop-hosted prairie and grasslands workshop attended by 105 landholders.
- A monthly Clifftop newspaper article series on the natural history of the blufflands.
- Four public field trips, drawing 217 participants, jointly hosted by a variety of SWIWAP partners (Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee, Clifftop, IDNR, INPC, Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society, University of Illinois Extension, Illinois Speleological Survey).
- Monroe County's 5<sup>th</sup> Grader Conservation Days, jointly hosted by three SWIWAP partners (University of Illinois Extension, Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, Monroe County Farm Bureau).
- The University of Illinois Extension's Master Gardener and Master Naturalists Programs.
- IDNR and Illinois Speleological Survey programs at Camp Vandeventer (Boy Scouts of America).
- A 4-H project / program hosted by Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves.
- The National Wild Turkey Federation hosted several stewardship outreach programs.
- Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society hosted three public presentations on the natural history of the corridor.

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

The SWIWAP calls for the development of a GIS-based mapping tool to aid in conservation planning. Demarcating current and historical land cover, INAI site location, karst recharge areas and a host of other parameters would be of use for science-based evaluations. The SWI RC&D submitted a C-2000 grant proposal for funding the project last year. Given the state's fiscal crisis, any C-2000 funding is doubtful. Grand Victoria Foundation is funding the development of a similar tool as a part of its Vital Lands Illinois initiative. We will wait to see if the Vital Lands mapping tool will meet our needs.

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 and 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.

The Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS) added a random survey point in the corridor to its Critical Trends Assessment Program (CTAP) in 2008. There are now 2 random and one reference points in the corridor.

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

A herpetological survey for threatened and endangered species in the corridor was funded by an IDNR grant in 2008.

Citizen-science volunteers, associated with Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society, the Illinois Native Plant Society, the Illinois Ornithological Society (IOS), the North American Butterfly Association, and the St. Louis Herpetological Society, conducted 900 hours of surveys in the corridor in 2008. They tendered field notes and rare-sightings reports to IDNR, INHS, and IOS; and helped to build the bio-diversity database. More volunteers are needed to assist with monitoring plant populations. 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. See Section X below.

#### **X. Action Items:**

1. Clifftop will draft, and IDNR, INPC and the Illinois Speleological Survey (ISS) will coordinate, a Strategic Land Protection Plan for the corridor. Deadline: April 2009
2. Clifftop will brief the Monroe County Assessor and Regional Planning Commission about SWIWAP WG abilities to assist landowners in developing forest management plans for the Conservation Stewardship Program. Deadline: March 2009

3. NRCS will draft, with IDNR, Clifftop, and NWTF assistance, an Environmental Quality Incentives Program special funds / priority area proposal. Deadline: April 2009
4. IDNR (Program Office) and Clifftop will work to clarify Illinois Conservation & Climate Initiative's "Managed Forest Carbon Offset and Trading Program" application guidelines and enrollment procedures. Deadline: August 2009
5. The Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee, with inputs from IDNR, INPC, Clifftop, and the Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves, will develop a Volunteers Training Requirements Plan for the SWIWAP WG. Deadline: November 2009
6. Clifftop and Ducks Unlimited will explore the feasibility of landscape-level wetland restoration projects. Deadline: November 2009
7. The Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves (Herpetologist Bob Weck) will seek grant money to fund a study of possible mitigation measures to limit the road kill of migratory herpetofauna on Bluff Road. Deadline: August 2009
8. The Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves and Clifftop, working with IDNR, will develop a listing of best management practices for maintaining sinkhole pond amphibian habitat. Deadline: December 2009
9. Clifftop and ISS, with SWI RC&D's assistance, will seek grant funding to contract a karst outreach educator. Deadline: July 2009
10. INPC, aided by Clifftop, will market research opportunities in the corridor with universities. Deadline: July 2010
11. IDNR and INPC will develop a pilot "plants of concern" monitoring protocol for the University of Illinois Extension Service, the Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee, the Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves, and Clifftop. Deadline: September 2009

**XI. Administration:** The next meeting of the SWIWAP WG will be in December 2009.