

# **Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Partnership 2009 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 as 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.

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 Land Conservancy, 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 on December 3rd, 2009. This report of the meeting highlights the current status of conservation in the corridor, details the significant actions accomplished during 2009, and refines timelines and divisions of labor for out-year SWIWAP Partnership efforts.

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

- IDNR manages 2052 state-owned acres; 160 of these acres were acquired in 2009.
- INPC manages 1319 acres of privately owned land enrolled, in perpetuity, in INPC programs. 145 of these acres were enrolled in 2009. In addition, 741 privately owned acres are enrolled in short-term, renewable easements and/or stewardship programs.
- 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, 5117 acres in the corridor and adjacent wetlands are afforded some level of protected status and/or stewardship.

## **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 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.**

Efforts for permanent land protection through conservation easements/acquisition are detailed above. 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 activities in 2009 included:

- 13 contracts on 946 privately owned acres totaling \$272,789 in cost-share incentives to landowners in USDA's / NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).
- 7 contracts on 876 private-/village-owned acres totaling \$151, 272 in cost-sharing incentives through the new Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative--a special focus area program for EQIP and WHIP funds
- 5 contracts on 295 privately owned acres totaling \$139,988 in cost-share incentives to landowners through USFWS'/IDNR's Landowner Incentive Program.
- \$70,000 in contract services for habitat improvements on 8 sites, within a 2000-acre project area, through a State Wildlife Grant, administered by IDNR.
- \$6,000 of IDNR funds for contract services for Stemler Nature Preserve.
- \$16,065 of INPC funds for contract services on 123 privately owned acres.  
Totaling: \$656,114 in 2009, as compared to \$418,000 in funding in 2008.
- Currently, 87 landholders have enrolled 3982 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.
- IDNR / INPC monitored and culled invasive species on state-managed lands throughout the corridor.

- IDNR / INPC conducted 7 prescribed burns on 152 acres in the corridor.
- 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.
- The National Wild Turkey Federation has reached an agreement with Ameren IP to fund the planting of native warm season grasses and forbs along the new power line right-of-way under construction in the wooded Fults Road portion of the corridor.
- Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves contributed 187 volunteer hours to site maintenance, sinkhole cleanup, and invasive plant controls.
- The Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee contributed 858 volunteer hours to site maintenance, trail development, invasive plant controls, seed collection, and prescribed burns.
- Clifftop contributed 620 volunteer hours assisting IDNR / INPC with prescribed burns, seed collection, and invasive plant control; and, contributed 226 hours helping private landowners with invasive plant control and 9 prescribed burns on 76 total acres.

Illinois' Conservation Stewardship Program (developed to reduce property tax rates on woodlands) 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 partners can assist landowners in their development. The Monroe County Assessor has been informed of the partnership's ability to assist in this area.

Clifftop, in collaboration with the partnership, was awarded a contract, valued at \$1.5M, with NRCS' Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, to bring focused EQIP / WHIP incentive funding to the corridor.

The Illinois Conservation and Climate Initiative's new "Managed Forest Carbon Offset and Trading Program," as currently constructed, is not particularly useful for incentivizing woodland landowner stewardship efforts.

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

IDNR is developing a multi-year management plan for Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, a restoration plan for the Zoeller (Stemler) tract, and a management plan for the Annbriar (Mueller) tract.

INPC conducted an aerial (helicopter) survey of bush honeysuckle infestation in the corridor. A report will follow.

The Mississippi Limestone Company spent \$10,000 to remove cedars and other woody invasive plants on a portion of its hill prairie complex.

A concerted, focused honeysuckle campaign is merited for the corridor. See Section X below.

Stemler Nature Preserves has the greatest infestation of bush honeysuckle of any state-managed lands in the corridor. The Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves do not have the resources to combat the problem in a timely and effective manner. Additional funds must be secured to address Stemler's stewardship. 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 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 during the 2008 SWIWAP Partners meeting 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. Subsequent discussions with Ducks Unlimited during 2009 disclosed they currently do not have funding to launch a stewardship initiatives program in our area.

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.

Ground water quality must be continuously monitored. A study on water quality and the health of aquatic macro-invertebrates is merited. See Section X below.

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

Information / outreach programs in 2009, focused on conservation and stewardship, included:

- A monthly Clifftop newspaper article series (CLIFFnotes) on the natural history of the bluff lands
- April, 2009 - Native Plants & Honeysuckle Seminar, co-hosted by University of Illinois Extension, Clifftop, Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves
- April 2009 - Monroe County's 5<sup>th</sup> Grader Conservation Days, jointly hosted by University of Illinois Extension, Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, Monroe County Farm Bureau
- May 2009 - Festival of the Bluffs, co-hosted by all SWIWAP partners
- June 2009 - Jr. Master Gardner Camp, University of Illinois Extension
- June 2009 - Stemler Nature Preserves Tour, organized by the University of Illinois Extension
- July 2009 - Eastern Timber Rattlesnake Seminar, co-hosted by IDNR, University of Illinois Extension, and Clifftop
- October 2009 - Prairie Restoration Telnet, hosted by the University of Illinois Extension
- October-December 2009 - The University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists Program; IDNR, INPC, ISS, and Clifftop helped with instruction and field trips
- October 2009 - Honeysuckle Workshop, hosted by Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve Stewardship Committee
- November 2009 - Prescribed Burning Seminar, hosted by Clifftop
- November 2009 - Honeysuckle Workshop, hosted by Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves

- 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.**

Partnership members, Clifftop, NRCS, IDNR, INPC, and ISS, developed BLUFFscape (Strategically Conserving and Preserving an Eco-region) in 2009. The strategic conservation plan provides a systematic, science-based methodology for selecting and prioritizing parcels for stewardship and protection.

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.

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

Citizen-science volunteers, associated with Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society, the Illinois Native Plant Society, the Illinois Ornithological Society (IOS), the North American Butterfly Association, the St. Louis Herpetological Society, and local conservation oriented NGOs conducted 447 hours of surveys in the corridor in 2009. 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. Develop a volunteer training requirements listing. Tasked: INPC. Deadline: July 2010
2. Develop a bush honeysuckle eradication campaign. Tasked: Clifftop, Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves, INPC, IDNR. Deadline: December 2010
3. Secure additional, dedicated funding to clean up honeysuckle at Stemler Nature Preserves. Tasked: Clifftop, IDNR. Deadline: December 2010

4. Determine best practices to limit herpetofaunal road kill along Bluff Road. Tasked: Clifftop & Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves. Deadline: September 2010
5. Obtain funding for a study of best management practices for amphibian habitat in sinkhole topography. Tasked: Clifftop & Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves. Deadline: October, 2010
6. Obtain grant funding for a karst outreach educator. Tasked: Clifftop & ISS. Deadline: December 2010
7. Obtain grant funding for a study of ground water quality and the health of aquatic macro-invertebrates. Tasked: ISS & Clifftop. Deadline: December 2010
8. Expand academic research in the COA. Tasked: Clifftop, IDNR, ISS. Deadline: December 2010.
9. Develop "plants of concern" monitoring protocols. Tasked: IDNR. Deadline: September 2010
10. Develop and implement protocols for stewardship volunteers to be able to work with less direct supervision and greater independence. Tasked: Clifftop, IDNR, INPC, Ext. Service. Deadline: September 2010.
11. Obtain funding for Festival of the Bluffs / BioBlitz 2011. Tasked: Clifftop  
Deadline: December 2010

**XI. Administration:** The next meeting of the SWIWAP Partnership will be in December 2010.