

# Bluffviews

a quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

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## The Resiliency of Nature

text and photos by Joann Fricke

During these challenging times, Nature has been a safe haven for many. People are finding more time to get outdoors to enjoy local flora and fauna. Maybe they are discovering a bird, bug or flower they have never encountered before. Facebook groups and pages are getting more questions than usual about these important finds. I, for one, have spent a LOT of time outdoors of late, but, being retired and an active Clifftop volunteer, this is nothing new for me. Social distancing has not been a problem as this is the time of year when bush honeysuckle is most noticeable and easy to find. I'd venture to guess I've killed over a thousand of these invasive species over the last few months.

This brings me to the subject of resiliency. I am fascinated by the fact that plants will grow right out of rock. Some of us can barely get anything to grow in good soil, much less solid rock. In the larger photo at right, the invasive bush honeysuckle was thriving in a small limestone boulder. If you look closely, you can see the roots growing in the crack that it had either created or taken advantage of. The smaller photo exhibits the fact that the bush is no more—cut and treated with herbicide mixed with water and dye.



As an example of a beautiful resilient native wildflower, the Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) shown in the photo at left, is also quite happily growing out of a limestone outcropping, taking advantage of a small depression in the rock where some dirt and debris have collected, making for a good place to set root.

As humans, may we all be as resilient as these plants, in what may be a new normal for our species.

## What the Serpents of the Bluff Started

text and photos by Justin Elden

My name is Justin and my interest in nature is more rooted in the creatures that are often overlooked or unwanted. I've spent my entire life outside, looking down towards the ground, along the banks of lakes and deep in the cracks of bluffs and rocks, with the intent of finding snakes and their allies. I am currently employed by the Saint Louis Zoo in the Herpetology department which has granted me remarkable opportunities in the institution itself as well as around the world, but this all started right here in our little corner of Southwest Illinois.

I am from Southern Illinois, born and raised. I spent my years as a kid catching turtles and frogs, similar to how most people who grow to work with these animals start. When I got my driver's license I would convince friends to go out with me to natural areas to find species not found in my home town of Freeburg. We were not keeping them as pets and at this time I did not have a camera, just the desire to see wild reptiles in their habitat. I later learned this was called "herping", similar to bird watching or birding and had applications both as recreation, photography, as well as field research. The most special area to me was the ragged cliffs running alongside Bluff Road around Valmeyer and Fults. To me the bluffs of Monroe county were as exotic of a locale as the Peruvian Amazon, full of life, difficult to traverse, and absolutely beautiful. This area is home to some of the most amazing reptile and amphibian species in the state, many of which only live in the small band of habitat created atop the bluffs and their valleys. Some, such as the great plains rat snake and coachwhip (which may now be extirpated from Illinois) are more at home in the southern end of Missouri or Oklahoma yet take advantage of the shards of habitat left in Illinois. This is the extent of their range, they are isolated and on the absolute fringes of suitable habitat. Since my teenage years I have been to the Peruvian Amazon and a few other exotic places, yet areas like Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve and Clifftop's own White Rock Nature Preserve are still incredibly special to me as these places shaped my understanding of nature and introduced me to the art of finding wild reptiles. As a sixteen year old kid I was ecstatic over finding a rattlesnake or milk snake, pictured at right, and this hasn't changed as an adult man.

When I began college I attended schools here in Southern Illinois, again not straying from my roots. I attended South Western Illinois College (SWIC) for a few years where I had my first formal introduction to academic biology by some amazing Biologists, Bob Weck of the Clifftop Board being one of them. While attending SWIC, I took an ecology course that focused primarily on getting students into the field and into the bountiful natural areas of Southern Illinois. Many of the places we went I had previously hiked but now I was given a formal explanation for why these places were special and of importance--why they were worthy of admiration and conservation. The Illinois Ozarks was now explained to me in a way to help me understand why they had the variety of species they had, why they were unique. Getting this in-depth exposure to it through these courses was a major moment of clarity for me.







I left the Southwest corner of Illinois for a bit to attend Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and receive my Bachelor's Degree in Zoology and after graduation I got busy. I began working full-time for the Zoo's Herpetology department and conducting fieldwork here in the Midwest and across the globe. Some of these projects have been sponsored by the institution, such as conservation of vipers in the western Asian country of Armenia and work with frogs in Ecuador. Other projects of passion and recreation such as working with a private preserve in Guatemala to study the unique Yellow-blotched Palm Pit Viper (photo, left) or Aruba to photograph the critically endangered Aruba rattlesnake.

I began tracking copperheads, as seen in the photo at right, with fellow snake nerd Ben Jellen at Clifftop's Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, a project very special to me as it introduced me to the organization and the incredibly generous people who run it. I've seen many corners of the world in the pursuit of herpetology and conservation of endangered species. I have the bluff tops of Monroe County, and the milk snakes and rattlesnakes who live here to thank for that. I am forever in debt to these hills and these animals for the passion they instilled in me and I hope that my efforts of snake conservation and educating the public on the importance of these creatures is evidence of this gratitude.



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## Upcoming events???



Due to the "shelter in place" order being extended through May, our annual Members' Day event, scheduled for May 16, has been postponed. We will reschedule for a later date.

Whether to hold the following events at Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve is yet to be determined:

Prairie Hike, June 13, 9:00 a.m.  
 Fireflies and Other Critters of the Night, June 13, 8:00 p.m.  
 Prairie Wildflower Trail Run and Fun Run/Walk, July 11, 8:00 a.m. start  
 Prairie Hike, July 18, 9:00 a.m.  
 Prairie Hike, August 8, 9:00 a.m.

Please watch our website or local newspapers regarding these and other future events.

# Clifftop Awarded Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation Community Stewardship Challenge Grant



## Illinois Clean Energy

*community foundation*

Clifftop has once again been rewarded for the work we and our volunteers do to protect and preserve local natural areas. The Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (ICECF) recently awarded us a Community Stewardship Challenge Grant to help with stewardship at White Rock Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve.

Over the past sixteen years, the Foundation has provided financial support for clean energy investments in Illinois through a variety of programs. To date, ICECF has awarded over 5,000 grants providing \$258 million to Illinois nonprofit organizations, schools, municipalities and other local and state government agencies. The grants support activities in every one of Illinois' 102 counties.

The ICECF grant matches the money we raise from our supporters at a 3:1 rate up to a maximum of \$21,000. They also acknowledge the work of our volunteers by providing an additional \$4,000 for a minimum of 400 hours of volunteer work on the Preserve or Reserve. All funds raised and received from ICECF will be used to continue invasive species control and to expand two rare hill prairies known as Edna's Dell and Overlook Prairie.

Over the years, Clifftop has received several grants from ICECF for land acquisition, stewardship, amenities and events. Jared Nobbe, President of Clifftop's Board of Directors said, "Without the help of foundations like ICECF, Clifftop would not be able to fulfill our mission to preserve and protect the bluff lands in Monroe, Randolph and St. Clair counties. Their generous support over the years has helped us purchase, steward and protect both our White Rock properties on Bluff Road and Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve on G Road."

In the photo at right, children gaze out upon the Mississippi River valley at Overlook Prairie, one of the areas of White Rock Nature Preserve that will benefit from the ICECF Community Stewardship Challenge Grant."

If you, your family or friends would like to donate toward this endeavor, please print and complete page 5 of this newsletter and send it with your check to the address shown on the form. Please note in the memo line of your check that this is a donation toward the stewardship challenge grant. Thank you!







**Illinois Clean Energy**  
community foundation

Yes, I want to help Clifftop with the  
Community Stewardship Challenge Grant Project!

Enclosed please find my donation in the amount of \$\_\_\_\_\_\* . I understand that for every **one dollar** that Clifftop raises for stewardship at White Rock Nature Preserve and Land & Water Reserve, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation will contribute **three dollars** in matching funds, up to **\$21,000**. In addition, for a minimum of **400 hours** of volunteer stewardship documented at White Rock, ICECF will donate **\$4,000**.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Sorry, I can't help financially, but I am willing to volunteer for stewardship work. Please contact me.

Send your check payable to Clifftop to:  
P. O. Box 131  
Maestown, IL 62256

Please note in the memo line of your check  
that this is a donation toward the  
stewardship challenge grant. **THANK YOU!!!**

\*Clifftop is a 501(c)(3) non profit organization,  
incorporated in Illinois. Donations in support of  
Clifftop's activities are tax deductible to the  
extent allowed by law.





Photo gallery...



Erosion control work and seeding were done on areas most in need at PWSNP in April. Photos courtesy Susan Rick.

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Jack-in-the-pulpit



Ohio buckeye



Wister's coral root orchid

Observed recently at White Rock NP. Photos courtesy Joann Fricke



Dogwoods bloom along Ridgetop Trail-South