

# Bluffviews

A quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

January 2021

Vol. 11, No. 1

## Clifftop Turns Fifteen

By Joann Fricke

Clifftop (Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus or Prairie) was founded in January 2006 by a group of local landowners. Clifftop's mission is to conserve, preserve and protect the Mississippi River bluff lands corridor in Southwestern Illinois. The 40-mile long corridor (from Dupoué to Prairie du Rocher), containing 130,000 acres, hosts a unique Illinois landscape of hill prairies, limestone glades, large forested blocks, and the karst sinkhole plain. The corridor is home to over 50 rare and threatened or endangered wildlife species.



Martin Kemper, IDNR Heritage Biologist at the time, led the group "Aster Walk and Hawk Watch" in 2007 and can be seen here pointing out the types of plants that live at the bluff edge.

I became aware of Clifftop after purchasing 40 acres in the bluffs near Valmeyer in June 2007. I attended the Clifftop sponsored "Aster Walk and Hawk Watch" at Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve in September 2007 and was soon hooked on preserving and protecting the bluff lands in the area.

Little did I know that I would join the Clifftop Board of Directors in January 2010 and become the Membership Chair a year later. In this capacity, I have met all 270 of our members, if only via email sometimes, have called for innumerable volunteer work days and have given many presentations about the organization to fraternal organizations, retired teachers groups and school classes.

Clifftop works in three key areas:

**Education and public outreach.** Since founding, Clifftop has hosted or co-hosted 124 public outreach events (workshops, seminars, field trips), with 6,500 attendees. Since 2007, the organization has published a monthly local newspaper article series on the values of conservation. Quarterly newsletters to members were instituted in October 2011 and a Facebook page was created in January 2012.

**Direct hands-on land stewardship.** Since founding, Clifftop's Board of Directors, members, and supporters have donated nearly 50,000 volunteer hours to the causes of conservation in the corridor.

**Land protection projects to preserve our highest quality natural areas in perpetuity.** Clifftop NFP co-owns White Rock Nature Preserve and White Rock Land & Water Reserve. The organization is the sole owner of the Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve (PWSNP), purchased in 2013, to protect the Fogelpole Cave System, Illinois' largest and most biologically diverse. In October 2020, Clifftop acquired the existing 85-acre Storment-Hauss Nature Preserve, just one-half mile east of PWSNP. Clifftop has garnered over \$4.75 million dollars in federal and foundation grants and more than \$100,000 in local donations to acquire these natural areas.

# Happy Birthday Clifftop! 15 Years of Conservation Success!



Perspectives from Debbie S. Newman, IL Nature Preserves Commission (INPC)



When I landed in the INPC Natural Areas Preservation Specialist job for southwestern Illinois in 1996, I was dismayed to learn this populated region had virtually no conservation-focused non-profit organizations, except a tiny Sierra Club Chapter in St. Clair County. Southwestern IL Resource Conservation and Development focused on land conservation in the entire Metro region; and while they later did become a full-fledged non-profit (now Heartlands Conservancy), at the time they were actually an arm of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The first year as I got to know my area, I saw huge, untapped potential for conservation, especially in the bluffs of Randolph, Monroe, and southern St. Clair Counties. This region is unlike any other, with Ozark species of plants and animals found nowhere else in the state and 4,000+ acres of Illinois Natural Areas Inventory sites with 35% of the state's remaining hill prairies embedded in large blocks of forests, but it needed urgent attention. In 1996, the protection of this entire bluff corridor consisted only of the 532-acre Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, pictured at right, and 19.5-acre Brickey-Gonterman Memorial Hill Prairie Nature Preserve.



Photo courtesy Joann Fricke

I had a lot of work ahead of me and I needed help. But far more important than needing help: I truly believed that the only way to have long-term sustainable protection of an area or resource was for the citizens living in that region to appreciate and have an ownership stake in the conservation in their backyards. Yes, when possible we should support conservation efforts in the Amazon, or Indonesian rainforests or the Arctic region. But we *need* to first support our own local wild lands, flora and fauna.

By the early 2000s, we had a thriving Illinois Audubon Society chapter known as Kaskaskia Valley Audubon Society (KVAS), two other people and I co-founded. Little did I know at the time that this would literally provide the ground in which to plant the seeds of Clifftop!!! KVAS was bringing together like-minded people. With monthly meetings and field trips, there was finally a venue for people who love nature to get to know each other. The idea of a bluffs conservation group had been rolling around in my mind for a while, and I'd even awakened one night with a version of the name/acronym "Clifftop" in my head. But how to find people who had the time and ability to launch such a group? After being involved with so many groups over the years, I'm here to state...there are many foot soldiers in the conservation world (and we need them!) but finding leaders to serve on boards is an eternal problem for nearly every group.

In 2003 I'd had an INPC 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event at the Brickey-Gonterman preserve. It was there I met Ralph Buettner, an enthusiastic nature lover who wanted to know a LOT more about these unique bluffs, in which he owned land. Around the same time, I met Carl and Pen DauBach at a Kaskaskia Valley Audubon meeting and was told by a mutual friend, "You should talk to them about your idea for a bluffs group; they live in the bluffs and have a lot of organizational experience."

As I got to know Carl and Pen, I had big confidence in their interest and abilities. I also knew I had to get their feet on the ground more; all Clifftop volunteers will attest that once you get "in the weeds" doing fire, honeysuckle pulling, brush clearing on prairies, you learn quickly the needs, challenges and opportunities. So I invited Carl, Pen, and Ralph to burns and workdays. At this point, they all had a chance to run far, far



in the other direction from this sometimes-grueling work (such as being out on a burn line until Midnight, mopping up...an early experience for all three!) All of us benefitting today from Clifftop's work can thank these hardy souls for not only their tenacity, but their *enthusiasm* to stay the course.



Ralph takes a break on a burn early in his prescribed fire career. Photo courtesy Tom Rollins.

The DauBachs and Ralph and others we'd been recruiting quickly learned how a group could help: education and advocacy for bluffs conservation, hands-on volunteer help, and maybe eventually some land preservation. I hoped for any of the above. Little did I know Clifftop would eventually do all of those and more!

The particulars of all the activities to set up this non-profit group I'll leave to other history-tellers except to say enormous effort goes into the creation of an organization. When Carl and Pen said "we're gonna do it", my role as lead instigator (lol) had succeeded, and I stepped away. The founding board of Conserving Lands in Farm, Forest, Talus,

or Prairie, CLIFFTOP, subsequently launched one of the best conservation partnerships in the state, which continues today. (See below a list of all Clifftop board members to date, including founding members).

How does one even begin to highlight all the work Clifftop has done for SW Illinois? In a mere 15 years? Clifftop has far exceeded what I ever thought was even possible back in the early 2000s. Bringing millions of dollars to SW Illinois for stewardship and acquisition of important natural areas, to tens of thousands of volunteer hours on these lands through the stewardship branch of Clifftop---those dedicated CLIFFhangers, to far-reaching educational programs and field trips, newsletters, newspaper and social media articles.

Within their first year, Clifftop held a Woodlands Management Workshop that drew over 100 people. The following year, a workshop on rare hill prairies and glades of the bluffs was equally successful. Over the last 15 years Clifftop has hosted programs and workshops on everything from prescribed burning to emerging tick diseases to research on plants and animals of the bluffs. In 2009 and again in 2011 Clifftop was the primary organizer and co-host of Festivals of the Bluffs. The latter was in conjunction with a BioBlitz of Salt Lick Point Land & Water Reserve, our region's largest protected parcel. The event pulled in over 50 scientists.

The above two paragraphs describe success in terms of numbers. But the successes that can't be recorded on spreadsheets have to do with an evolving conversion of the psyche of those laboring to make Clifftop work, and to truly advance conservation of our beautiful bluff lands. From my vantage point, I have watched so many people...board members and volunteers...blossom with passion, creativity, and knowledge to accomplish this conservation work. It gives me a happy heart!

And to nurture the ever-expanding circle of conservation participants, Clifftop has done some awesome projects such as coordinating and hosting the weeklong "conservation camp" for biology students from Southeast Missouri State University, educating students in real world experience and getting extra help on preserves. The 2016 group of students is shown at right. The now-experienced Clifftop board and volunteers continue to train new volunteers on burning, exotics control and other activities.



Photo courtesy Pen DauBach

Current and former members of Clifftop’s original Steering Committee and, since 2010, our formally constituted Board of Directors. Current director’s names are in bold face, founding members are marked with an asterisk.

Joan Bade\*  
Ralph Buettner\*  
Carl DauBach\*  
Pen DauBach\*  
Dennis FitzWilliam\*  
Charlie Frederick  
**Joann Fricke**  
Bill Gonterman\*

Stephen Gonzalez  
**Susan Harbaugh**  
**Jim Hill**  
Dennis Jacobsen  
**Paul Janssen**  
**Wayne Johanning**  
Dennis Knobloch\*

**Jared Nobbe**  
George Obernagel\*  
**Susan Rick**  
Tom Rollins  
**Laura Schaefer**  
**Jeremy Volkmar**  
**Bob Weck**  
**Delbert Wittenauer**



Like Clifftop, the Friends of Stemler Cave Woods was formed 15 years ago as a volunteer stewardship group. The Friends group is focused on the Illinois Department of Resources-owned Stemler Cave Woods Nature Preserve, located at the northern end of Clifftop’s geographic area of interest, in St. Clair County. From the start, the Friends of Stemler Cave Woods and Clifftop have cooperated and coordinated to share resources and expertise. Clifftop volunteers are regular participants in stewardship events in Stemler Cave Woods and founding members of the Friends group serve on the Clifftop Board of Directors. This partnership is one of many examples of the vital role that Clifftop plays as a catalyst for conservation and natural resource stewardship in Hill Prairie/Bluff/Sinkhole Plain corridor.

Bob Weck, Friends of Stemler

\*\*\*\*\*

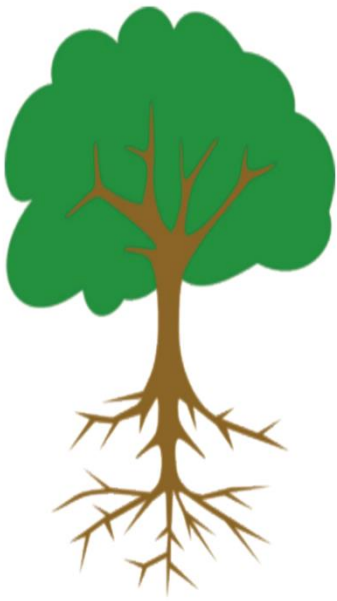
Congratulations to Clifftop on your 15-year anniversary! Since the beginning, our two organizations have partnered on important and innovative methods to protect high-quality natural areas in southwestern Illinois. Our combined successes include White Rock Nature Preserve/Land and Water Reserve and Mill Creek Natural Area. Together we have preserved habitat for endangered species and special places for the public. Cheers to your next 15 years and beyond!

Mary Vandevord, President & CEO HeartLands Conservancy

\*\*\*\*\*

The Clifftop organization has been very helpful to the Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee. Clifftop has partnered with the committee in many ways beneficial to the conservation community, such as the 2011 Festival of the Bluffs held at Borsch Park in Valmeyer. They have assisted with honeysuckle work days and acquiring grants from USDA and Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation to remove invasive species from the Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve.





## Giving from Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs)

Annual withdrawals from traditional retirement accounts are required after age 70 1/2, and the penalty for skipping a required minimum distribution is 50% of the amount that should have been withdrawn. However, if you are in the fortunate position of not needing your distribution for living expenses and are charitably inclined, you can avoid income tax on your required withdrawal by donating your money directly to a qualifying charity, such as Clifftop, via a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD).

A QCD is an IRA withdrawal that is paid directly from your IRA to a qualifying charity. While income tax is normally due on each traditional IRA distribution, the account owner does not need to pay taxes on the amount transferred to charity.

Please consult your financial advisor for further information.

\*\*\*\*\*

The conservation community lost a true warrior on December 11. Ralph Buettner was a founder of Clifftop and an original member of our Board of Directors. When you asked Ralph to do something, you knew it would get done and done right. He participated in countless prescribed burns and maintained our burn equipment as well as the equipment for IDNR for many years. In 2012, he was named IDNR Volunteer of the Year. Yet, Ralph didn't live for awards, he lived for his family and friends, his work and conservation of the land he loved. Ralph is pictured at right with his daughter, Lisa, at a prescribed burn at White Rock Nature Preserve.



Photo courtesy Tom Rollins

\*\*\*\*\*



Clifftop is an all-volunteer organization. If you aren't on our volunteer call list and would like to be, please contact Joann at 618-935-2542 or [cliffmbr@htc.net](mailto:cliffmbr@htc.net)

\*\*\*\*\*

## Moving?



Please be sure to notify us of your new address. Send updates to [cliffmbr@htc.net](mailto:cliffmbr@htc.net) or call 618-935-2542



# Through the years...memories of some of our largest events.



1



2



3

1. 2011 White Rock NP opening, over 100 in attendance. PC Tom Rollins.
2. 2013 Big burn at White Rock, over 25 volunteers. PC Tom Rollins.
3. 2013 Announcing Wightman purchase, over 100 attended. PC Tom Rollins.
4. 2017 Solar eclipse event at PWSNP, over 300 in attendance. PC J. Fricke
5. 2019 PWSNP grand opening, over 135 in attendance. PC K. Constantine
6. 2019 First Prairie Wildflower Trail Run, over 60 participants. PC M. Fricke



4



5



6