

Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Partnership 2012 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 sixth time, on December 14th, 2012. Chris Evans, Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Invasive Species Campaign Coordinator, and Shawnee Resource Conservation and Development, joined the Partnership and attended this meeting. This report of the meeting highlights the current status of conservation in the corridor, details the significant actions accomplished during 2012, 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.
- HeartLands Conservancy (formerly The Land Conservancy of the Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation and Development) 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.
- Since 2008, the partnership has worked to enroll 1044 acres into protective programs.

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 jointly-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.

HeartLands Conservancy purchased 94-acre wetland tract adjacent to Kidd Lake Marsh State Natural Area that was conveyed to IDNR in 2011, adding these additional protected acres to the COA.

HeartLands Conservancy and Clifftop partnered again in 2012 to purchase and protect 115 acres in southern Randolph County. While the property is just outside of the COA, it borders two IDNR Nature Preserves, and falls within Illinois' Ozark

Natural Division. The Boards of Directors of both organizations passed resolutions affirming the conservation values of the Mill Creek property and their intentions to hold the lands to protect these values.

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 2012 included:

- 59 contracts on 3175 private-/village-owned acres totaling \$578,362 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.
- \$193,458 in contract services for habitat improvements on 8 sites, within a 2000-acre project area, through a State Wildlife Grant, administered by IDNR.
- \$60,215 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: \$1,046,069 (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 2012 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 2012 included:

- IDNR - 110 hours

- INPC - 194 hours
 - Clifftop - 1389 volunteer hours
 - Salt Lick Point Committee - 1058 volunteer hours
 - Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves - 204 volunteer hours
- Total: 2955 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 2012 focused on conservation and stewardship included:

- January-December: 10 (45 total since 2008) trained Master Naturalists
- February: Soil and Water Management Seminar
- February: Eagle Trek
- February: Owl Seminar
- March: Weekend Gardener Program
- March: Bird Window Strike Program
- April: Salt Lick Wildflower Hike
- April: Monroe County 5th Grade Conservation Days
- April: Birding the Bottoms
- April: Herps Seminar
- May: Bug Invaders Telnet
- May: Flora & Fauna of Southern Illinois Program
- June: White Rock Wildflower Walk
- June-August: Junior Master Gardener Day Camp
- June: KVAS Nature Festival
- August: Tree Selection & Care Telnet
- September-November: Master Naturalists Training

- September: Hosted Illinois Nature Preserves Commission Meeting
- October-November: Special Mill Creek Natural Area Tours
- October: Coneflowers Gone Crazy Telnet
- October: Stemler Honeysuckle Workshop
- October-December: "Under the Canopy" Newsletter
- November: Carnivores Program
- November: Salt Lick Point Honeysuckle Workshop
- Cliffnotes monthly newspaper series and quarterly newsletter, Bluffviews

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. 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 2012, 522 hours were dedicated to conducting natural history surveys in the COA.

The following significant research was conducted in the COA in 2012:

- SEMO Entomological Study on Fults Hill Prairie NP
- EIU/IDNR Floristic Study of COA INAI sites
- ISS Stemler Cave Mapping (3893 ft) (new pit cave discovered)
- ISS / INHS Baseline Monitoring & Molecular Characterizations of SE Enigmatic Cavesnail (*Fontigens antroecetes*)
- U of I, Hill Prairie Soil Microbial Study
- INHS White Mine Transformation Study
- IDNR Barn Owl Recovery Program
- SEMO Weevil Study at White Rock NP
- IDNR Fults Hill Prairie Fire Scar Study
- IDNR Salt Lick Point Shortleaf Pine Study
- INPC Helicopter Honeysuckle Survey

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

All SWIWAP 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, 2013
2. Develop "Invasive Species Campaign Plan" for the COA. Tasked: INPC, Clifftop, IDNR, IDNR Invasives Campaign Coordinator Deadline: December 2013
3. Determine best practices to limit hepetafaunal road kill along Bluff Road. Tasked: Clifftop Deadline: December 2013
4. Develop a blueprint of concerted, doable, prioritized objectives and actions for increasing karst protection. Tasked: Clifftop Deadline: December 2013
5. Develop purchased easement policy guidelines. Tasked: HeartLands Conservancy & Clifftop; Deadline: December 2013
6. Explore feasibility of hosting an Illinois Academy of Sciences conference on the biology of Southwestern Illinois Tasked: ISS, Bob Weck; Deadline: December, 2013

XI. Administration: The next meeting of the SWIWAP Partnership will be in December 2013. A listing of partnership members is attached.

SWIWAP Partnership Listing

ORGANIZATION	POINT-of-CONTACT	E-MAIL
IDNR	Mike Mason Mark Brown	Mike.Mason@illinois.gov Mark.v.brown@illinois.gov
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KVAS	Tim Dever	tdever67@yahoo.com
Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves	Bob Weck	bnweck@htc.net
Salt Lick Point Stewardship Committee	Rich Dependahl	saltlick@htc.net
NWTF	vacant	
IWAP Invasive Species Campaign Coordinator / Shawnee RCD	Chris Evans	rivertoriver@gmail.com
Clifftop	Carl or Pen Daubach	clifftop@htc.net