

# Southwestern Illinois Wildlife Action Plan Partnership 2013 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 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 the seventh time, on January 31st, 2014. This report of the meeting highlights the current status of conservation in the corridor, details the significant actions accomplished during 2013, 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, IDNR purchased 27-acres as an addition to Stemler Cave Woods Nature Preserves and Clifftop purchased a 535-acre tract to protect the Fogelpole Cave system in 2013.

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 2013 included:**

- 61 contracts on 3432 private-/village-owned acres totaling \$583,671 in cost-share incentives through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, a special focus area program for EQIP and WHIP funds and general EQIP and WHIP funding.
- 6 contracts on 409 privately owned acres totaling \$196,350 in cost-share incentives to landowners through USFWS/IDNR's Landowner Incentive Program.
- \$203,458 in contract services for habitat improvements on 8 sites, within a 2000-acre project area, through a State Wildlife Grant, administered by IDNR.
- \$75,540 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
- \$4750 in NWTF funds for 31 acres

**Totaling: \$1,081,453 (Life of Contract dollars) (CY 13 funding = \$35,384)**

- 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 2013 included invasive species control, hill prairie and limestone glade restoration, trail maintenance and development, nature preserve infrastructure development, prescribed burning, and native seed collection & re-seeding.

**Stewardship hours in the COA in 2013 included:**

- IDNR - 159 hours
  - INPC - 296 hours
  - Clifftop - 1607 volunteer hours
  - Salt Lick Point Committee - 1690 volunteer hours
  - Friends of Stemler Nature Preserves - 226 volunteer hours
- Total: 3978 hours

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 some acres currently are 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 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.

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.

Clearly, protection of larger portions of recharge basins offers better protection of associated cave systems. To this end, Clifftop purchased 535-acres of the Fogelpole Cave system recharge basin in 2013.

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

Public information / outreach programs in 2013 focused on conservation and stewardship included:

- January-December: 13 (58 total since 2008) trained Master Naturalists
- January: Prescribed Burn Workshop (27 attendees)
- February: Owl Prowl at White Rock (52 attendees)
- March: First Detector Program (28 attendees)
- March: Weekend Gardener Program (140 attendees)
- March: Purple Martin Program (30 attendees)
- April – July: Junior Master Gardener Summer Day Camp (16 attendees)
- April: Birding 101 Workshop (27 attendees)
- April: Tick Seminar (53 attendees)
- April: Fifth Grader Conservation Days (300 attendees)
- April: Salt Lick Spring Wildflower Walk (90 attendees)
- April: Spruce Problems Telnet (5 attendees)
- May: Wild Weird Mushrooms Presentation (33 attendees)
- May: Pollinators & Insecticides Telnet (5 attendees)
- May: “Don’t Doubt the Drought” Telnet (4 attendees)
- June: White Rock Herps Hunt (14 attendees)
- July: Chainsaw Safety Workshop (17 attendees)
- August: “Some Like It Hot” Telnet (16 attendees)
- August: Pollinator Conservation Seminar (26 attendees)
- September: “Pollinator Plants” Telnet (12 attendees)
- September: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of INPC Presentation (23 attendees)
- September: Meet the Mast Field Trip (14 attendees)
- October: Conservation Police Program (19 attendees)
- October: Salt Lick Point Honeysuckle Workshop (26 attendees)
- October: Stemler NP Honeysuckle Workshop (38 attendees)
- November: Weevils of White Rock Seminar (18 attendees)
- “Under the Canopy” Monthly Newsletter
- “Cliffnotes” Monthly Newspaper Article
- “Bluffviews” Quarterly Newsletter
- KVAS Quarterly Newsletter

**2013 = 25 Programs / 1032 attendees**

### **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](http://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 2013, 323 hours were dedicated to conducting natural history surveys in the COA, including a Spring Bird Count, a Christmas Bird Count, and submission of EORs

In addition, the following significant research projects were conducted in the COA in 2013:

- SEMO Entomological Study on Fults Hill Prairie NP
- EIU/IDNR Floristic Study of COA INAI sites
- ISS Stemler Cave Mapping
- ISS / INHS Baseline Monitoring & Molecular Characterizations of SE Enigmatic Cavesnail (*Fontigens antroecetes*)
- U of I, Hill Prairie Soil Microbial Study, published in Soil Microbiology
- INHS White Mine Transformation Study
- Barn Owl Recovery Program
- SEMO Weevil Study at White Rock NP
- Mill Creek BioBlitz
- INHS White-Nose Syndrome Survey
- NGREC Fogelpole Cave Groundwater Quality Baseline

### **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 conduct an Invasive Species Campaign in the COA. Tasked: All partners. Deadline: December, 2014
2. Determine best practices to limit hepetafaunal road kill along Bluff Road. Tasked: Clifftop Deadline: December 2014
3. Explore feasibility of hosting an Illinois Academy of Sciences conference on the biology of Southwestern Illinois Tasked: ISS, Bob Weck; Deadline: December, 2014

**XI. Administration:** The next meeting of the SWIWAP Partnership will be in January 2015. A listing of partnership members is attached.

## SWIWAP Partnership Listing

ORGANIZATION	POINT-of-CONTACT	E-MAIL
IDNR	Mark Phips Mark Brown	Mark.phips@illinois.gov Mark.v.brown@illinois.gov
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NWTF	vacant	
Clifftop	Carl or Pen Daubach	clifftop@htc.net