President's Column by J. Elizabeth Maas

The commotion of the holidays is over, leaving time to reflect on the 2014 growing season and make plans for the year ahead. I am already considering how to increase biodiversity in my backyard—more native plantings, another rain garden, a bat house, maybe a small bucket pond. Living in town, I am limited to my little space, but I have improved opportunities for biodiversity in my yard, connected my microhabitats to those of my neighbors where possible, and built a small corridor of urban biodiversity.

When planning, I always consider the pollinators, those little guys who make food production possible. The monarch butterfly and many other valuable pollinators are increasingly at risk due to lack of habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists forty-three different pollinators as threatened or endangered; its website states, “Early conservation to avoid the need to list species is a far more economical and practical approach to protecting our nation’s biological heritage.”

When you read that we are experiencing the sixth greatest mass extinction in geologic history, extinction caused by anthropogenic activities, you may feel overwhelmed, and your New Year’s resolutions to do more for biodiversity may seem more trifling than joyful. Habitat fragmentation, introduced species, climate change, overharvesting, and population growth are principal factors leading to a proposal to rename the current geologic epoch the Anthropocene, recognizing the global impact of 7 billion humans.

What can we do? Teach others how to steward the land. In November, the trust co-hosted a dynamic event on tool maintenance for land management with Johnson County Women, Land and Legacy. Continue the dialogue by advocating for biodiversity. I was invited to present to the Iowa City Altrusa chapter in November. Let me know if you would like me to speak to a group with which you are affiliated.

Support those who protect, restore, and maintain biodiversity. Last year the Bur Oak Land Trust continued to partner with Friends of Hickory Hill Park. UI environmental engineering students who usually work at the park were dedicated to our Pappy Dickens Preserve. More than sixty volunteers removed farm trash, invasive species, and other undesirables from the preserve. As clichéd as it may sound, by working together we can make a difference.

Bur Oak Land Trust is always looking for volunteers, financial support, and landowners interested in permanent protection of their property. You expect me to make this plea for support, but be assured that it is sincere and earnest. Only together can we develop a resilient community that can more easily adapt to our changing world.
Executive Director’s Report by Tammy Wright

Happy New Year! Being able to attend Rally 2014, the National Land Conservation Conference held by the Land Trust Alliance, was extremely energizing for me. I focused on workshops geared to land trusts that rely heavily on volunteers, are actively acquiring conservation easements, and need to enhance communication, carry out a new strategic plan, increase funding, and manage current funds wisely—in other words, our very own land trust. The 2015 conference is in Sacramento in October; contact me if you are interested in attending.

October’s eighth annual Under a Cider Moon was a great success . . . truly the best yet! We can’t thank you enough for your part in this sold-out event. What? You weren’t able to attend? Mark your calendar for October 24, 2015.

Our speaker for Prairie Preview xxxii (yes, xxxii years, can you believe it?) is Jim Kessler, who teaches at Iowa Valley Grinnell. Jim has been involved with reconstruction and restoration efforts for almost forty years, most recently on his and his wife’s thirty acres near Grinnell.

We extend our condolences to the family of Anthony “Tony” Zaleski, especially his wife, Sue, with grateful appreciation for the memorial contributions that have been so thoughtfully made in his honor. Turkey Creek Preserve was one of Tony’s favorite places; we will dedicate a bench there in his name in the spring.

Thanks to Bur Oak Land Trust member Ed Lorson, our office windows are now wrapped with these two winter-defying photographs. Please stop by and admire them when you are in the neighborhood.

Property Steward’s Report by Jake Hart

In September, we were lucky enough to host an event that was the first of its kind in Iowa. All the land trusts in Iowa got together to show their support and get some work done. It was a partnership between us, the Nature Conservancy, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Whiterock Conservancy, and Four Mounds Foundation. Staff from each organization as well as more than fifty volunteers added up to a phenomenal turnout.

Our task: removing invasive honeysuckle and autumn olive at Turkey Creek Preserve. Everyone had a great attitude about the work and the property—I was truly amazed by the unbelievable amount of work we accomplished. Following our work, volunteers were treated to lunch and live music by Castle Ridge. We look forward to making this an annual event; plan to join us this coming June at a different property in Iowa.

Once again, staff from United Natural Foods, Inc., donated a Day of Caring at one of our properties. This year they worked at Turkey Creek after the Iowa land trusts’ work day. It was misting a bit when UNFI was out there, but we still managed to burn piles of brush and get everything cleaned up. Despite the weather, they never let up and stuck with it all day. We greatly appreciate their help.

You will see changes on the properties next time you visit. We purchased new aluminum signs for all the properties. They look great and should last for years to come. The other change you will see came courtesy of Tyler Barr, who did his Eagle Scout project with us. Tyler and his fellow scouts built and installed new kiosks for Belgum Grove, Shimek Ravine, and Pappy Dickens Preserve. And speaking of terrific changes, congratulations to Tammy and Bruce Wright upon their marriage!
**From Our Members**

**THE TOMATO coulis** has been put up, and I've turned to preparing packets of basil and olive oil for freezing. The forecast calls for frost, which means sure death for the basil if I don't get it picked tonight. For sure, autumn's arriving. I don't mind. Like John Donne said, in heaven it's always autumn. Most of my friends don't like the fall. But I fall in love every year, with the changing of the leaves and the rain that pulls at them. It's a season of trees, and I celebrate by walking the sidewalks of my neighborhood, with their yellow-brown burnished canopies.

I begin my walking meditation by the majestic pin oak outside my front door. It's a true oak, stately and sheltering, with deeply grooved bark and rust-colored leaves that don't fall until after snow. I pass under other majestic trees as I stride in slo-mo down my red-brick street.

When I take a right to the old Czech hall, I can't help but guess whether the Knock Out roses, as I have learned they are called, will still be blooming by the statue of Mary at St. Wenceslaus. It's a competition I've created between her and the statue of St. Anthony of Padua in the rose garden next to Mercy Hospital, where I circle back toward home.

As my feet climb Gilbert, Iowa City's longest street, I sense the pull of gravity in my calves. My breath rises in my chest, I let the air in and out, in and out, in a mindful rhythm. At the mouth of my alley stands a neighbor's ancient apple tree, surrounded by rotting Golden Delicious. When I get to my broken-down garage, made to house two Model Ts, my eyes search for the oak we just planted, a bur oak, *Quercus macrocarpa*. My favorite oak, it has lobes that are rounded, not pointed. As I study it, it seems fine.

I would like to believe this oak will last forever, spreading out to protect our house against the summer heat. But then I recall it replaces another bur oak, one that died suddenly after eight years, a volunteer growth from a giant oak felled there by disease. At that moment of recollection, the gray sky darkens, and chilly raindrops fall. Leaves begin to mat on the backdoor step, where I wipe my soggy shoes. Trees lose their youth.

—MIKE LEWIS-BECK works an Iowa City garden and writes poetry, essays, fiction, and political science

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**Spotlight on Shimek Ravine**

**SHIMEK RAVINE** is a diverse woodland remnant just west of Shimek Elementary School in the middle of Iowa City. Nearby residents purchased these thirteen-plus acres of oak-hickory forest to protect them from development and generously donated them to the trust in 1992.

Shimek contains 160 species of ferns and wildflowers, including the uncommon golden ragwort and crested wood fern. The woodland is home to white and green ash, ironwood, bitternut and shagbark hickory, and bur and black and red oak. Native shrubs include gooseberry, blackberry, black raspberry, elderberry, and nannyberry. Showy displays of Jack-in-the-pulpit, May apple, downy yellow violet, tall bellflower, and great blue lobelia occur in spring and summer, and Indian pipe is present in unusual abundance near the south end of the ravine.

A rare woodland within a residential area, Shimek Ravine is a buffer from development, a sanctuary for native species, and a preserve for residents to enjoy. Property managers Terry Dahms, Carter Johnson, and Ken Lowder are working to control invasive species. As Ken says, “It’s all about invasives. There remains a massive amount of work to get ahead of it all. But this spring, we had two work days there—guys from the UI men’s track team and graduating seniors from City High School put in a major effort, and it was deeply appreciated.”

As a result of these ongoing efforts, the improvements are visible. Carter says, “What keeps me coming back is the progress we have already seen. A sense of shared effort for shared benefit really motivates me to contribute to the ongoing restoration of Shimek Ravine.”

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*Photos of Shimek Ravine by Don Roberts*
Purple martins, the iridescent blue-black swallows seen soaring around big white birdhouses in farmyards and suburban lawns, have a unique bond with humans. It is believed that Plains Indians of long ago befriended these voracious insectivores by hanging hollow gourds in their villages. Over many generations, purple martins came to live almost exclusively around people and, in eastern North America, to become the only bird totally dependent on humans for housing. Although fairly common, purple martins have declined in number by about half a percent per year since the mid 1950s, primarily because of variable weather and competition from European starlings and house sparrows.

Johnson County's Songbird Project is a small nonprofit organization whose activities include education, data collection, and habitat management, including thirteen purple martin colonies in Johnson and Washington counties. Because purple martins thrive around humans, the colonies are set in public places like golf courses, ball fields, and gas stations. One of the most successful colonies is at Casey's General Store in Hills, where people come and go twenty-four hours a day. During nesting season, volunteers take responsibility for one or more colonies, visiting them every three to five days to remove nests of invading birds, check for signs of predators, and monitor the eggs, development, and eventual fledging of baby birds.

One such volunteer is Holly Carver, Bur Oak Land Trust board member, who with her husband, Lain Adkins, watches over the colony at the Brown Deer Golf Club in Coralville. Carver and other volunteers use data sheets from the Purple Martin Conservation Association to keep track of how many eggs are laid, calculate hatch and fledge dates, and record the number of hatchlings, nestlings, and eventually fledglings from each nest.

“Last year we fledged eighty-two birds from the Brown Deer colony, averaging five birds per nest,” she said. “What tickles me is the contrast here—golfers, golf carts, rock and roll, and birds, and all seem to love it. The communal nature of this colony is great—it’s not off in a preserve but right here in the middle of the community.”

Altogether, the Songbird Project fledged 873 purple martins from 195 nests in 2014, compared to 707 birds from 197 nests in 2013. Newly fledged and adult birds gather into large flocks for their journey to their wintering grounds in the Amazon Basin; huge roosts of several hundred thousand birds can be seen along the Gulf Coast in late summer. “The migratory pathway of food and habitat has to be there,” said Jim Walters, Songbird Project director. “It’s a continental and hemispheric task. Helping them succeed is rewarding work, but the main reason to do this is simple enjoyment: martins are beautiful birds, with beautiful songs, and it’s so interesting to see them arrive, grow up, and leave and then await their return.”

Establishing a new colony requires an open area with full sun, good housing, some strategic thinking, and luck. If you’d like to try—or if you’d like to help monitor an already established colony—contact Jim Walters at the Songbird Project, 319/466-1134 or jcmwalt@infionline.net.

Visit www.buroaklandtrust.org or call 319/338-7030 for up-to-date information about these and other events.

Great Backyard Bird Count sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, February 13–16

Prairie Preview XXXII, Jim Kessler, Celebration Farm, Thursday, March 12

Annual meeting, Park Lodge at Terry Trueblood Recreation Area, Friday, April 24
Let’s go birding!
Many of today’s best birders got out into the field at a young age. Catherine Cocks talked with Carl Bendorf, founder of Iowa Young Birders, about encouraging young naturalists.

What inspired you to found Iowa Young Birders?
After growing up and raising our family in the Iowa City area, my wife, Linda, and I spent eight years in Minneapolis and Chicago before deciding to return to Johnson County in 2011. Both Linda and I had a lot of background in education and nonprofit work. Combining this with a desire to give something back to the Iowa birding community led us to start Iowa Young Birders. Ultimately, our inspiration is a desire to provide young Iowans who are interested in birds with a way to connect with mentors and with each other and to use birding as a way to build awareness of habitat and conservation issues.

How did you get interested in birding?
When I was twelve, I started birding around the Amanas. A friend and I would ride our bikes out into the country (which wasn’t very far!) to find birds. We even used a small reel-to-reel tape recorder to record birds. Over the last fifty years, I’ve always watched birds, and I’ve been involved in the Iowa City Bird Club, the Iowa Ornithologists’ Union, and the American Birding Association, of which I currently serve on the board of directors. I’ve also been fortunate to learn from a number of mentors and friends, including Tom Kent, Jim Fuller, and others here in Iowa City.

What kind of activities do you offer through Iowa Young Birders?
Our main program involves offering young birder field trips on Saturday mornings all around the state. Since 2012, we’ve led more than thirty field trips and have hosted more than five hundred young birders, parents, grandparents, and volunteers. Our field trips are led by volunteers and are family-friendly; they focus on giving young birders ages eight to eighteen a lot of encouragement and a great outdoors experience. There is generally no cost for our field trips, but we do require advance registration. We are also planning a special overnight bus trip this coming March to central Nebraska to experience the spectacle of sandhill crane migration. Our full schedule and all the details are at our website: www.iowayoungbirders.org. Our field trip program is made possible with support from both individual contributors and organization grants.

What information and equipment would I need to get started as a birder?
The main ingredients to start birding are a sense of curiosity and the willingness to give it a try. Anyone can start birding around home or in the neighborhood. Beyond that, there are endless options for binoculars and field guides and information on the internet; we try to provide some guidance for these on our website. The Iowa City Bird Club is also a great resource for learning about birds and birding. The best advice is to just start observing and, of course, come on one of our field trips!

Do you have a favorite place to look for birds in or near Iowa City?
Johnson County offers many excellent places to find birds, including Hickory Hill Park, Coralville Reservoir, and Lake Macbride. My personal favorite spot right now is probably our own five-acre property in northeast Johnson County. In the past three years, we’ve seen 148 different species of birds here, which is a relatively high number considering we don’t have any water areas nearby.
Spring Warbler Walks
by Mark Madsen

YES, IT'S JANUARY, but all the more reason to anticipate spring migration. Every year the Iowa City Bird Club organizes bird walks in Hickory Hill Park throughout May to document the spring migration of warblers and other woodland birds. The Bur Oak Land Trust now cosponsors these weekday walks, which are open to the public. Led by expert and enthusiastic birders who are often accompanied by skilled nature photographers, the morning walks begin at 6:30 and end by 8:30.

Because of its large size—250 acres—Hickory Hill is an attractive spot for migrating warblers. We saw twenty-eight warbler species this spring, my favorites being the bay-breasted, Cape May, and Blackburnian warblers, as well as a Louisiana water-thrush not reported on warbler walks in recent years. And with all its mature trees, the park is an excellent place to see woodpeckers. We saw downy, hairy, and red-bellied woodpeckers every day. Northern flickers also showed up, and the group was treated to nice views of a pileated woodpecker.

All the common migrant thrushes were seen along with the typical residents of the park. We also got great views of scarlet tanagers, which nest there, and summer tanagers. A number of birds nest in the park, and two nests in particular caught our attention. A Cooper's hawk nest was easily seen at the beginning of May but was almost hidden among the leaves by the last week, and a nest belonging to a pair of blue jays was located at eye level off the trail in the thorns of a honey locust.

Altogether we saw more than sixty species of woodland birds—yellow-rumped and black-and-white warblers being the most numerous—along with a few mallards and wood ducks and other water birds that flew over the park. Count on joining us in the spring!
Protect, preserve, restore . . . it’s all about the trust.

Please share this copy of Heritage with your friends and family!