President’s Column by J. Elizabeth Maas

I hope you enjoyed our beautiful, mild summer, our reward for enduring a brutal winter. Unfortunately, we started the season with heavy three- and four-inch rains, and while the Iowa City/Cedar Rapids area did not suffer major flooding, other Iowa communities were affected. Erratic weather is becoming routine, yet it seems we are still surprised when these events occur; at least adults are surprised. In June, when a repeat of the 2008 flood looked possible, my daughter brightly asked, “Where will we go to sandbag?” Surprised, I realized that her baseline had shifted. Shifting baselines are the incremental lowering of standards that lead new generations to define what is normal. Lacking knowledge of the historical and natural condition of their parents’ environment, each generation accepts the lower standard. Flood events, helping friends and family, and filling sandbags have become routine summer activities.

In my career as a teacher and a restoration ecologist, my life is filled with environmental concerns like biodiversity loss, water pollution, and unbridled land development. I don’t want the next generation to think that 10 to 30 percent less biodiversity and muddy, incised creeks are normal. Protecting and restoring land are integral to preparing for more erratic weather and reversing the shifting baseline of the next generation. We can do this, but we will need time to build awareness before we can begin to accomplish our goal.

Part of this effort calls for improving the visibility of the Bur Oak Land Trust in Iowa’s Creative Corridor. We have 400-plus members in a growing metropolitan area of more than 445,000 people. Members of our Publicity Committee spearheaded the development of our new logo as well as signage for our office and properties. Now they are tackling a new website. These efforts are essential to expand and support our membership.

To combat shifting baselines, the Bur Oak Land Trust is hosting more educational events. On May 17, Connie Mutel organized an erosion control field day that highlighted the use of brush dams to reduce erosion. In July, Tom Gelman presented a legacy-planning session to introduce prospective donors to life estate giving. And Belgum Grove is becoming a hot spot! In June, Nancy Seiberling Circle members enjoyed dinner there; in July, Wayne Petersen and Dan Black presented a delightful new event, Music on the Prairie; and in September, Family Day featured a rock-skipping contest.

On Saturday, October 25, Connie Mutel will host a follow-up erosion control workshop. If you have other ideas for fun and/or educational programs, please share them with me or Tammy. These events and changes are examples of how the trust continues to be cultivated by a host of dedicated volunteers and staff; together we can make a difference.

We Have a New Logo!

Robyn Hepker, co-founder of Iowa City’s award-winning design firm Benson & Hepker, generously applied her creative energies to a graphic representation of our new name. The result: this colorful bur oak leaf—deceptively simple, elegant and streamlined, classic but with a bit of zing—that perfectly captures our active commitment to conservation.

Iowa Citizens have long appreciated Robyn’s visual contributions to the Iowa City Downtown District, Iowa Summer Writing Festival, Riverside Theatre, the UI women’s basketball program, and many other organizations. Members of our Publicity Committee and board of directors greatly appreciate her cheerfulness, her patience, and most of all her good nature as she negotiated the many pitfalls of designing a new logo.

Benson & Hepker’s motto is “good design can change the world.” Robyn’s logo definitely has our vote.
Executive Director’s Report  
by Tammy Richardson

Hello, Bur Oak Land Trust members and friends. How exciting it is to be able to say that! Yes, the Johnson County Heritage Trust is now the Bur Oak Land Trust. We realize that change, even important change, can be difficult, and thus we particularly appreciate your support as we all work through this transition. It’s already very clear to see from my desk that this change was a great one.

Where has the summer gone? The Bur Oak Land Trust has been buzzing, along with the bees, with planning for new conservation easements as well as the eighth annual Under a Cider Moon, scheduled for October 24 at the Celebration Barn. This year’s offerings will feature getaways from Wisconsin to Texas, theater and museum tickets, tailgate and taco and dinner parties, gift cards providing many opportunities for retail therapy, handcrafted furniture and jewelry, and much more. Please make your reservations by October 15; if you can’t attend, look at the auction items on our website and call me if you would like to place a bid. Those who attended Music on the Prairie at Belgum Grove, hosted by Wayne Petersen and Dan Black, benefited from a peaceful evening of music by Furia, brats and burgers, fireflies, guided tours, and conversation that proved once again that there is nothing quite so enjoyable as an outdoor concert. We hope that Music on the Prairie will become an annual event.

The new landscaping to the south of our building is so beautiful. Thank you to all who worked to create it, particularly Judy Nauseef for her thoughtful design; Lon Drake, Pat Ryan, Lain Adkins, and Cheryl Miller for their herculean efforts with shrubs, dirt, and mulch; and Forever Green, Pleasant Valley, and Country Landscapes for their generous donations.

As Mehmet Murat ildan writes, “Reaching a fixed destination is not a big success; the big success is to reach a mobile destination, a destination which continuously escapes from you; it is to reach a bird flying not to a mountain sitting!” On behalf of the Bur Oak Land Trust, I would like to thank you for sharing your gifts with this great organization as we reach for that “flying bird” carrying out our mission to protect and conserve our natural areas for future generations!

Introducing Board Member  
Carolyn Buckingham

Carolyn Buckingham is an attorney with an interest and background in environmental, land use, and conservation law. She studied at Vermont Law School and obtained a master’s in environmental law and policy in addition to her law degree. Carolyn grew up in Chicago but is most recently from Fairbanks, Alaska, where she served on the board of directors of the Interior Alaska Land Trust. She and her husband, who was born and raised near Shueyville, moved to Iowa City in the fall of 2011. Carolyn enjoys cross-country skiing, hiking, camping, and canoeing and is excited about becoming more involved with the Iowa conservation community.

In Memoriam,  
Robert Sayre, 1933–2014  
by Connie Mutel

English professor, conservationist, and environmental historian Robert Sayre was our president from 2000 to 2004, a crucial time when the trust was transitioning from a small, reactive group to today’s much larger, proactive organization with its greatly expanded influence. During his presidency, we acquired the Big Grove preserve and took an important step forward by accepting our first conservation easements. Bob and his wife, Hutha, have been some of the trust’s most generous supporters.

Before becoming president, Bob had defended the trust’s acceptance of forty acres of pastureland with few natural remnants. This was not a popular stand to take, but today that site, Belgum Grove, has become a model for returning nature and diverse human pleasures to former agricultural land. I see Bob’s support of Belgum Grove as an example of focusing on the possible and bringing it to pass, something I think he did many times. His vision helped push the Bur Oak Land Trust to new limits, and we are the richer for it.

Bob was a man of ideas and opinions that he loved to share with others, stretching himself and them in the process. His love of Iowa’s natural and social history led him to edit a series of books that championed a greater appreciation of his adopted home state. He wanted, as he wrote, “to sensitize people to the special qualities of the Iowa landscape.” I remember the way Bob encouraged us all to approach the land in new and different ways. Through his efforts with Bur Oak, his ideas will continue to be written on our Iowa landscape. And through his reshaping of our engagement with that landscape, Bob’s spirit will remain with us.
Emerald Ash Borer Update
by Mark Vitosh

Since 2010 the emerald ash borer has continued to spread in Iowa, and as of early August 2014 twelve counties in the state have been declared infested. Earlier in the summer of 2014, an adult beetle was positively identified in Iowa City, but at this time no infested trees have been found in Johnson County. This means that the insect could have been carried in on firewood, or it could have flown in from an infested tree in the area. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources’ Forestry Bureau are continuing to monitor for an infestation in Johnson County.

The entire state of Iowa is under a federal quarantine, which means that hardwood firewood, ash logs, and wood chips cannot be moved out of the state without a permit. Since the whole state is under a federal quarantine, it is not illegal to move material across county lines within Iowa, but I highly recommend that Iowans dispose of raw wood debris locally and do not transport it to any other location in the state. The emerald ash borer is not the only tree pest that can move on firewood, so it is a great practice to buy local firewood and not transport it to other counties.

For updates on the status of this beetle in Iowa, go to iowatreepests.com.

Marybeth Slonneger and The Burg
by Catherine Cocks

“I’m not a water person,” author, artist, and gardener Marybeth Slonneger says. “I love the land, hiking on prairies and through the North Woods.” That connection to midwestern landscapes drew her back here after many years of living in New York state, and it motivated her to donate the proceeds of her book The Burg: A Writers’ Diner to the Bur Oak Land Trust. This generous gift has helped the trust continue to conserve and restore properties around the county.

A celebration of Iowa City’s Hamburg Inn No. 2 and its many regular patrons, The Burg grew out of a similar sense of connection, in this case with the thriving community centered on the restaurant. Reading an essay by Gary Sanders about putting down roots and growing relationships here moved Marybeth to make her own contribution. She decided to write a book about the inn. Many of its patrons are regulars, coming in to eat every day or a couple of times a week, and both successful and striving writers find it a great place to work. Presidential candidates even stop by in season, like migrating birds.

“There were no hard parts,” she says. Everyone she approached about contributing to the book said yes, including well-known writers like Allan Gurganus, Marvin Bell, James Alan McPherson, Larry Baker, Mary Helen Stefaniak, and Hope Edelman.

When Marybeth finished the book, she decided to give the sales proceeds back to the community by donating them to the Bur Oak Land Trust. None of the people who wrote for the book had asked to be paid, so she didn’t want to profit from it either. She chose the trust because, like the book itself, it’s about preserving roots and building community, and also because she’s a dedicated gardener. A visit to New Orleans’ Garden District some twenty years ago made her realize what she calls the blessings of beautiful plants, and she threw herself into learning what she needed to know to grow flowers and vegetables. At the Wetherby House, a nineteenth-century house near downtown Iowa City that she has restored, she cultivates an all-white and an all-colors garden—both asleep under a fresh blanket of snow the day we talked.

At this point, Marybeth remembered that there had been a hard part about doing the book after all: selling it. Like many authors, she doesn’t enjoy self-promotion and pressing her work on others. Gary Sanders, who had inspired her in the first place, stepped up to help. He set up interviews and placed articles about the book, getting the word out to the restaurant’s many fans. Sales were brisk, but “there are still some copies left,” Marybeth says. You can buy them at the Hamburg Inn, benefiting both the trust and the restaurant—happily reopened after suffering a fire in May—and getting a great read in the bargain.

Upcoming Events

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

Under a Cider Moon . . . A Celebration of Autumn Friday, October 24
Community Night, Short’s Burgers Eastside, Wednesday, November 19
Benefit Sundays, Devotay, Sunday, December 7
From Our Members

southerners from the Gulf Coast, my wife and I took a walk on the wild side after thirty-four years when we moved to Iowa City so she could attend graduate school. Facing our first real winter ever, we had no idea it would arrive so soon. One afternoon in October, the sky darkened to the northwest, and soon enough huge snowflakes swirled in near-horizontal torrents. Our neighbors, jubilant co-eds, danced in the yard with arms outstretched, faces to the sky, shrieking how much they loved winter.

Indeed. As a duck hunter, anxious for my first glimpse of a flight day, I jumped in the truck, drove cautiously to Coralville Lake, then hiked down a snowy lane through the woods, hoping for that rare day when countless ducks fall out of the sky. Snuggled down in tall yellow grass behind a dirt levee, out of the cruel wind, I became covered with a blanket of snow. There was no action that afternoon, though a couple of flocks passed high overhead—barely visible in the blizzard—fighting the wind and heading north, trying to reach the lake after coasting past it.

A week later, our annual pumpkin party in the backyard was a chilly affair. Ever dig out pumpkin innards with frozen hands? Another first. And to my dismay, our local lakes were lost to ice before Thanksgiving, though a brief thaw in early December allowed for one last day of duck hunting on the water. But it was 16 degrees that day, the wind was groaning something awful through bare-limbed trees, and the lake’s steep dirt shorelines were hard as iron. My friend’s dog, pushed into the water to retrieve our only duck, swam to the other shore, shook himself off, and refused to participate.

Since our house has no fireplace, we hosted campfires in the backyard for friends and, later, for our two sons visiting at Christmas. Fortified with Ireland’s best, we huddled close around glowing embers like Napoleon’s soldiers retreating from Moscow. Gaining confidence in this new snowy land, we spent New Year’s Eve at the Green Mill in Chicago, listening to five hours of jazz. Little did we know that the polar vortex would arrive that night, raging outside as the snow piled higher. Next day, still snowing, it was time to escape from Chicago. We soon found out that it’s a serious adrenaline rush to spin 360 degrees through an intersection without a scratch.

So this was what true winter looked like. As temperatures plunged outside, the heater ran nonstop inside our little house on the prairie. Built in 1878, it wasn’t so well insulated. Arctic air crept relentlessly under every door. For the next two months, I used surplus Polish Army blankets to barricade us against the subzero temps. Overlaid knee-deep with yoga mats, fold-up chairs, extra blankets, and winter coats, they did the trick. Every morning we pulled them back, opened the door, and surveyed a never-changing white landscape. I amused myself by shoveling snow, twenty-four times to be exact. On those really cold mornings, when the snow was dry as flour at 10 below zero, I was able to sweep it with a broom. How cool is that?

Yes, it was a long winter. We now understand why locals apologize when they find out we’re from Florida. But we didn’t know any better, thought every winter in Iowa was like that. Friends commented on how quickly we adapted, and I guess it’s true. We’re already looking forward to our first campfire this autumn and listening to our favorite song by Gordon Lightfoot, “Song for a Winter’s Night,” which now carries special meaning—more than ever: “If I could only have you near / to breathe a sigh or two, / I would be happy just to hold the hands I love, / on this winter night with you.”

Property Steward’s Report
by Jake Hart

Fall is upon us, and I hope you will get out and enjoy the fall colors and migrating birds and butterflies on one of our properties. Big Grove, Turkey Creek, and Belgum Grove have especially nice trails. As always, we will be busy removing invasive species from the properties. This fall we will be prepping and planting a few more acres to native prairie and preparing fire breaks for the spring. We were lucky enough to receive a grant from Cargill, Incorporated, in Cedar Rapids to restore prairie at Turkey Creek. Without this grant, it would not have been possible to do this work, so we are very grateful.

We have already had some productive work days this fall. We were able to get a lot of work done and fulfill our contracts. We are moving forward with managing more actual area than we have been able to manage in previous years. This has all become more possible with more help from volunteers; Shimek Ravine in particular is becoming much more manageable. As more work gets done and as we stay on top of it year after year, the properties should require less intense management. It’s great to see these improvements; they reassure me and you that what we are doing does indeed make a difference.

We have a team from Conservation Corps Iowa scheduled for next spring, which should help us do a lot more prescribed burning and a lot more clean-up on the properties. We will be installing new signs for all the properties before the ground freezes. And Jeff Klahn was gracious enough to build a picnic bench for each of our eight properties this summer. These will be great for visitors and for work days. If you have something to donate or have skills you think we could use, please let me know. Thanks!

Erosion Control Field Day
by Ken Lowder

I normally think of soil erosion as a problem that happens on Iowa’s agricultural land. But I was surprised to see evidence of serious erosion in a woodland habitat during this outdoor seminar led by Wayne Petersen. Wayne coordinates urban soil and water conservation for the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. He had been consulting with Connie Mutel about ways to mitigate the gully erosion on her wooded property, and on May 17 he demonstrated the results of his efforts.

Wayne explained the basic concept of controlling erosion: reduce flowing water’s energy by decreasing its volume or velocity. This can be done by adding barriers or by spreading the water out. These actions in turn remove the flashiness of streamflow and allow sediment to settle.

Our group observed two ways of meeting these goals: by constructing a pond (formed by building a dam across a valley) or by installing much smaller check dams that are easily erected across small creeks. Though simple in concept, the check dams appeared to be very effective in reducing erosion. We also discussed installing rock chutes below knickpoints in a gully that was experiencing serious erosion.

Iowa’s precipitation patterns are changing. We are now getting heavier rains earlier in the growing season, before vegetation greens up. This means that our natural areas will become increasingly vulnerable to serious erosion and that these problems must be addressed—the earlier, the easier and better. For more help and information, contact the Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District at 319/337-2322, extension 3.

Wayne Petersen will repeat this field day on October 25. Attendance is limited and preregistration is required. If you are interested in attending, please contact Tammy Richardson at 319/338-7030.

Erosion control field day. Photo by Connie Mutel.

Thanks to Jeff Klahn, our properties now have picnic tables.
Ecological restoration expert Danielle Wirth at the Iowa-based Women, Food and Agriculture Network mentors women seeking to work in this field. Here's how she described the program to Catherine Cocks.

What’s involved in ecological restoration? Ecological restoration is the practice of bringing degraded land back to ecological health. Many involved in ecological restoration aim to restore the land to presettlement conditions, to recreate flora, fauna, hydrology, and fire regimes similar to those prior to Euro-American settlement.

We find out what the land was like back then by studying surveys, field journals, diaries of early settlers, and maps describing plant communities and hydrology of the presettlement landscape. In addition to written records, the land has its own historic accounting, which we can read by doing pollen analyses, looking for fire scars on older trees, and doing soil profiles.

What kinds of jobs are available in this field, and what kind of training do you need to qualify for them? Unfortunately, there aren’t as many jobs in this field as there used to be. In the past, governments invested more in stewarding natural resources. In the mid twentieth century, people who loved wild places, like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, got college degrees and were often hired by a government agency.

Today, governments still hire ecological restoration specialists, wildlife biologists, foresters, agro-ecologists, geographers, geologists, and botanists. However, they are not hiring enough to keep pace with the biological cascades occurring in global ecosystems. With more frequency, private industry provides some of these services, but not enough.

More and more, private landowners are recognizing the value of restoring their holdings. These landowners are also seeking the help of skilled ecological restoration professionals.

Many agree that experiential learning with a theoretical foundation in the sciences is the best route to entering this field. However, sometimes the route is more circuitous. Maybe you went to a park and had a fun time opening up an oak savanna. Later, you learned that oak seedlings need sunlight to sprout. Perhaps you read Stephen Packard and Connie Mutel’s Tallgrass Restoration Handbook. Volunteerism is also a route into ecological restoration.

What are the people who hire ecological restoration specialists looking for? We convened focus groups to ask hiring agencies what they wanted in newly graduated young professionals. To a person, agency managers said that field experience was at the top of their list. These scientists value the hands-on learning that internships, practicums, and field-based college classes provide. One DNR supervisor said that a recent graduate was skilled in computer-based mapping but could not identify the trees and birds outside the window.

What drew you to working with WFAN? In the late 1970s, I was fortunate to be among the first park rangers hired to work at the new Saylorville Lake Reservoir. In the late 1990s, I was invited to lead a nature hike for a group of women at the DNR’s Springbrook Conservation Education Center. I arrived early and had the benefit of listening to this amazingly diverse group of farmers, activists, and academics, all intelligent, open-minded, and ready to make positive changes in the world. I asked if I could stay for the entire weekend, and the rest is history. At that meeting the seed for what would become the Women, Food and Agriculture Network was planted; I was one of the founding members. I recognized that the environmental issue in Iowa is industrial agriculture, and WFAN seemed the best route to address the issues of food, family, farming, and ecological integrity.

Tell us about WFAN’s mentoring program for women restoration ecologists. Research into the distinctive concerns of women landowners led to our award-winning curriculum, Women Caring for the Land. I was tasked with developing an ecological restoration component. After we learned that women landowners were interested in hiring other women to do ecological restoration work, we secured funding to bring four early-stage women professionals together to pilot a new model for providing business skills to women considering starting their own restoration ecology businesses.

Our first four mentees have just finished the inaugural program, and we couldn’t be happier with the results. Jessica Abernathy, a UNI graduate student studying prairie ecology; Penny Perkins, who works in agriculture and does contract restoration as an independent contractor; Sarah Nizzi, who works for the Iowa DNR at the Prairie Resource Center in Fort Dodge; and Courtney Turnis, a private contractor of ecological restoration services and the mayor of Corning, took advantage of site visits and seminars to learn to work collaboratively and effectively with each other and with private landowners. We have already applied for funding for a second year and look forward to expanding this successful program.

WFAN interns Courtney Turnis (left) and Sarah Nizzi
Protect, preserve, restore . . . it’s all about the trust.

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