

LAND CONSERVATION highlights

Donors Step-Up to Protect Critical Ice Age Trail Lands

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"We'll have to pass." These were the words of Mike Wollmer, Executive Director of the Ice Age Trail Alliance, earlier this year when discussing the acquisition of two properties for the Ice Age Trail near John Muir's boyhood home in Marquette County. He was right, and the reality of these words felt like a crushing blow after nearly two years of negotiations with willing landowners. But, the bottom line was the Alliance was more than \$80,000 short of the funds it needed to match funding from the Wisconsin's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

It was reminiscent of a year ago when the Alliance faced a similar situation in Marathon County. After many years of negotiations, with the landowner and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), the Alliance found itself with an \$8,200 shortfall in funding. Disappointingly, it looked like we would lose both the opportunity to permanently protect the Trail and a northerly connection to a public road for the State Ice Age Trail Area in the Town of Ringle.

This was shaping up to be the second in a series of missed opportunities to protect land for the Ice Age Trail. In both cases, we were in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and down by two runs.

Fortunately, the middle of the lineup was ready to step into the batter's box!

A generous individual in Marathon County stepped up, ready to swing a mighty bat, and turn around our losing streak! This chapter leader sent out an appeal letter to local trail enthusiasts, both members and nonmembers, asking them to help meet the \$8,200 shortfall. The response was awe-inspiring! In a matter of weeks, the Alliance had the funds it needed to secure the land.

The catalyst, for funding the Muir acquisitions, was at first a single donor whose generosity provided the confidence to Alliance staff to make a broader request to the membership at the Alliance's Annual Conference in April. Those in attendance, and those who heard through the grapevine, quickly grasped the importance of protecting land surrounding John Muir's boyhood homestead and being able to extend the Ice Age Trail through this vitally historic area. By the end of the weekend, donors had pledged enough funds to cover



A bucolic view of the IATA's Muir Preserve, the future home of Ice Age Trail (and former Henderson family property). Trail through this land will eliminate a mile or two of road walk and allow hikers to enjoy a more comprehensive experience of following in John Muir's footsteps. Photo by Kevin Thusius.





all costs of the transaction. Without the initial seed money, a successful appeal would have been unlikely. Saved by a slugger again!

What was protected?

Land protection is like the season-long, molasses-paced experience of baseball (for the casual fan). Yet, there is amazing endurance inherent in the game. The need to win more than half the games while playing a game almost daily for over half a year is a lot like the time spent building relationships with landowners and partners. Baseball requires a lot of strategy and patience interrupted by the occasional crack of the homerun hit.



The Ice Age Trail, in Marathon County, had for roughly twenty years, travelled along a private driveway, between the Patterson's family home and their garage. A gracious arrangement, but not ideal for either the Trail or the landowners. In 2007, the WDNR acquired 758 acres between Poplar Lane and Mole Brook Road. However, this new State land did not provide a permanent Trail

connection to the north. After ten years of discussion, and plenty of red tape, Alliance staff helped facilitate a complex land swap in which the WDNR traded some of their land with the Patterson family. Due to the Patterson's patience and willingness to negotiate with the Alliance, and the persistence and willingness of our partner, the WDNR, to think outside the box, a Trail reroute is planned for 2019.

While a timeline for trail development has not yet been determined for the Muir area, the Ice Age Trail Alliance is now the owner of 50 acres of land and a 40-acre trail easement near John Muir County Park in Marquette County. The land consists of mature oak forest, beautiful wetlands, small fields, a quiet stream, and a remnant prairie. We fully appreciate how eagerly the Owens and Henderson families worked with us as we sought to acquire these acres. In addition to the aforementioned private funding, the Wisconsin Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund helped us round the bases.

Sometimes, the game feels like it is stretching endlessly into the ninth inning. For the die-hard fan, though, every pitch is a chance for some extraordinary hit, an amazing diving catch, or a precision throw that just takes your breath away. The pace of baseball allows the efforts of individual players the opportunity to be recognized almost as singular events. It takes a lot of skill, a dose of luck, and good eye-hand coordination to be able to hit a 90 + mph pitch. But, in the end, it is the team that celebrates the victory. It is the homerun hitter, the batboy or girl, the fan in the stands, and everyone in between that turns dreams into reality and shares in the excitement.

A sea of ramps will soon part and make way for a new section of Ice Age Trail on land formerly owned by the Patterson family, allowing for a scenic reroute of the Ringle Segment. Photo by Dave Caliebe.

