

LAND CONSERVATION highlights

Verona's Moraine Kettles Preserve — An Ice Age Trail Success Story

DAVID LONSDORF
Dane County Chapter



David Lonsdorf's vision realized: Once former agricultural fields, a prairie in the Moraine Kettles Preserve blooms in full summer glory. Photo by David Lonsdorf.

Volunteer crew leader, James Luebke, carefully rolled the last large stone into place along the low wall, guarding the roots of the large shagbark hickory tree. Dirt was added to fill in the gaps and tamped into place with the heavy tamping bar. Everyone breathed a big sigh of relief. Then, one-by-one, big grins spread across the faces of the crew leaders and other volunteers – the new trail was finally finished!

It had been almost two years and taken hundreds of hours of volunteer time for the trail to get to this point. The almost one-mile-long re-route snakes through the 24-acre Alliance-owned Moraine Kettles Preserve. Land which encompasses two recently planted prairies, and two separate woodlots, gradually being restored to fire-tolerant oak savannas. In addition, six neighboring landowners have agreed to incorporate parts of their properties into the overall vegetative management plan, enlarging the wooded restoration by an additional eight acres.

The spring woods are alive with wildflowers – many geraniums, Solomon seal, Jack-in-the-pulpit, and shooting stars can be seen during May. The five kettle ponds in the “north woods” are all full of water, flow slowly from one to another, and harbor wood ducks, mallards, and geese. A bald eagle nest has been sighted from the Preserve this year too! By June, the prairies become the focus of interest. Half-a-dozen species

of grasses, and nearly 50 species of forbs, begin their cycles of growth and flowering which last all summer. In fall, attention returns to the woods as the trees develop their color and begin to drop their leaves.

This spectacular result seemed far away even a few short years ago. The property was originally purchased in 1991 by the Alliance from farmer Ray Gust through the foresight of then Ice Age Trail Director Gary Werner. The Alliance allowed Gust to continue to farm the fields on the property and the Ice Age Trail passed alongside the fields and through the woods. Gradually, the woods became choked with invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle,

and the Trail became a narrow corridor through an impenetrable tangle of branches and brambles. It was a place to put your head down and quickly hike through, and was largely avoided in summer because of the infestation of mosquitoes.

That all began to change about five years ago as Dane County chapter volunteers began a slow (at first) process of removing and burning the buckthorn and brush. Over time, with the assistance of several large United Way and other group outings, the pace quickened. The brush was almost totally removed to reveal a degraded, but still intact, oak woods. The two areas of farmland were “reclaimed” in the fall of 2014, with the help of a grant obtained from the US Fish and Wildlife Service by the Alliance's Director of Land Conservation Kevin Thusius. They



Volunteers from Blackhawk Church help build tread, as part of the re-route through the Moraine Kettles Preserve. Their good, happy energy, providing the final bit of momentum, helped bring the long-term vision for this land to fruition. Photo by David Lonsdorf.

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OUTREACH & EDUCATION highlights

Verona Becomes the 7th Ice Age Trail Community

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Jon Hochkammer, City of Verona Mayor, Le Jordan, Verona Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director, Mark Geller, Town Chair, and David Lonsdorf, member of the Dane County Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance participate in the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Photo by Amy Lord.

On May 6th, community members of all ages gathered at Badger Prairie County Park in Verona to celebrate the Town and City's designation as the Alliance's 7th Ice Age Trail Community. The event featured hikes, activities for youth put on by the Verona PTO and a ribbon cutting ceremony. Almost 100 people attended the event which featured a Tyke Hike led by Lodi Valley Chapter member Patti Herman, speeches by Verona Mayor Jon Hochkammer, and Town Chair Mark Geller, and Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Le Jordan.

After the ceremonies, a bus took almost 60 people to Prairie Moraine County Park for a leisurely five-mile hike back to Badger Prairie. This hike was led by Dane County Chapter member David Lonsdorf and featured several stops highlighting the glacial geology along the Trail, and almost a mile of newly re-routed Trail and restored landscape.

The hike started by climbing the terminal moraine of the glacier where hikers enjoyed expansive views nearly 30 miles to the south. After crossing through a large 10-year-old restored prairie behind the moraine, the group

crossed into the Alliance's property called Moraine Kettles Preserve. The preserve has two newly restored prairies (three years old) and about 20 acres of restored oak savanna where the Trail has been rerouted to take advantage of the restoration efforts. Hikers then entered the "Verona Gorge" along Badger Mill Creek where the glacial outwash carved a 100-foot deep channel through bedrock.

The Ice Age Trail Community program celebrates formal partnerships between communities along the Ice Age Trail and the Alliance. The community businesses are promoted through the Alliance website and social media, with at least two "community oriented events" each year hosted by the local chapter. Additionally, the community enjoys easy access to a well-maintained Trail segment. The Alliance benefits from increased community awareness of the Trail and support for the Alliance's mission to create, support, and protect the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. Hikers benefit from increased services (lodging, food, laundry) for them as they pass through the area.

were planted with a robust mix of prairie seeds and Dane County chapter members added more seeds and hand plantings. The woods got additional help from a "forestry mower" to help clear brush on the Alliance's and neighboring lands, with their approvals.

The prairies are now entering their third year, and are "leaping" into full flower. The old Ice Age Trail has been re-routed into a more interesting and sustainable path. The 150-year-old trees in the oak savanna are beginning to re-emerge, and some burr oak seedlings are taking root. The 10,000-year-old kettle ponds and terminal moraine are once again able to tell their part of the grand story of the Ice Age through the eyes of Ice

Age Trail users. Moraine Kettles Preserve has now become a "destination" instead of a quick walk through. Trail users couldn't be more pleased.

Staff note: As often is the case, it takes the strong will and desire of one person to move mountains. In this case, David Lonsdorf was that person. By being able to see through the invasive brush and imagine the possibilities for the agricultural fields, he set the vision. He asked for help from volunteers and staff, and then, he put his sweat and muscle to the test and got to work. Thank you, Dave. Your vision and drive made the Moraine Kettles Preserve a destination for Trail users.