

Friends of the Blufflands Annual Report

August 2021

This is a report of Friends of the Blufflands activities since our August 2020 annual report. The board decided not to have our traditional in-person annual meeting this year because COVID-19 is still a health concern. We thought this annual report would be a better approach than an on-line meeting.

Thank you to our members for your support for the local blufflands and the preservation efforts of Friends of the Blufflands. The task is huge, and we wouldn't make progress without your help.

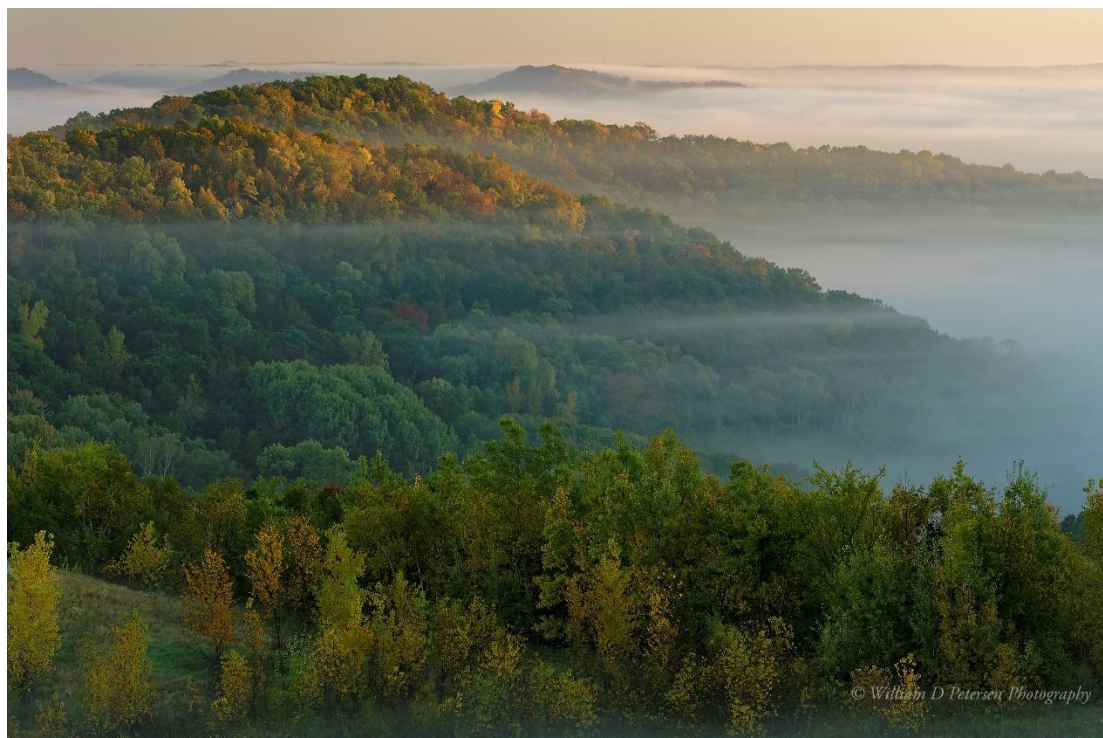


Photo by William D Petersen Photography

Mission

To be a voice for a wide variety of blufflands users who value the region's blufflands for:

- the natural habitat and the diverse plant and animal species supported
- the scenic beauty provided for residents and visitors
- the outdoor nature study and nature-based recreation opportunities provided
- the values green space provides to local communities and their residents

To promote sound conservation practices to maintain the health of the Coulee Region blufflands

- Forest management / reforestation
- Prairie management / restoration
- Control of invasive species, encouragement of native species
- Preservation of rare and endangered species
- Advise on trail placement and construction
- Protection of bluffland from development

Partners

Friends of the Blufflands is working with many partners to achieve our goals. With their help we provided over 2000 hours of volunteer labor in 2020 and 800 hours so far in 2021.

La Crosse Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department

Friends of the Blufflands has worked closely with the La Crosse Parks Department. We recently renewed an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) defining our roles in the mutual goal of enhancing the conservation and habitat value of Hixon Forest and all our blufflands.

Bluffland Coalition

Friends of the Blufflands has a Memorandum of Understanding in place with the Bluffland Coalition. The Bluffland Coalition is composed of local municipalities and non-profit organizations committed to managing the regional blufflands to preserve, protect, and connect land for wildlife habitat, recreational use, and the health and well-being of the residents and economy of La Crosse and Houston Counties.

Mississippi Valley Conservancy

Friends of the Blufflands works closely with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. We partnered with MVC in their Love the Bluffs campaign that's finishing this year, financed by a grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation.

Viterbo University, WisCorps Mayor's Crew, UW-La Crosse, Rotary After Hours, Hawkins Ash CPAs

Friends of the Blufflands has worked with volunteer crews of Viterbo students on Viterbo Service Saturdays, with crews from UW-L clubs and departments, and with the high school students on the Mayor's Crew financed by the City of La Crosse and supervised by WisCorps. These crews contributed many hours of labor and were responsible for much of what we've done in the past year.

The Prairie Enthusiasts

Friends of the Blufflands has worked with The Prairie Enthusiasts to determine management plans for Hixon goat prairies and to execute those plans.

Wisconsin DNR

In the past year we've worked with the DNR natural areas crew on Mathy Bluff prairie restoration and consulted with a DNR Forest Ecologist on the management of the oak reforestation project.

Grants Received

Friends of the Blufflands received two grants in the past year. The **C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin** provided a \$2,000 grant for restoration of Lookout Prairie. The **Stry Foundation** provided a \$2,000 grant for restoration of Zoerb Prairie. The **La Crosse Park Department** matched both grants. This provided a total of \$8,000 to hire contractors to

supplement volunteer labor where the work is too steep or too technical for volunteer labor. With this funding we were able to hire contractor Ridge and Coulee Conservation to accelerate the restoration of these prairies.

Projects

Skemp2 Reforestation Project

Reforestation efforts continue in the old field at the corner of County Roads F and FA that will eventually be an extension of Hixon Forest. We recently installed an educational sign there to explain the project and the value of oak forest that's being created. We continue to control the weeds at the site, monitor the tree cages and repair or move them as necessary, prune the trees, and put tubes on the trunks of larger trees that have had the cages removed. We also maintain Bluebird houses on the site, and have found Goldfinches and Yellow Warblers nesting there.



Zoerb Prairie

Zoerb Prairie continues to be a focus of our prairie restoration efforts. We cooperate with The Prairie Enthusiasts, who organized a work outing to girdle aspen tree clones surrounding the prairie and an educational hike to learn about the soils of the bluffs led by retired USDA soils scientist Peter Hartman. The La Crosse Park Dept hired a contractor to do a burn in March this year. The Stry Foundation grant enabled us to hire Jared Van der



Loop and Katie Hahn of Ridge and Coulee Conservation to clear woody species on the cliffs at the bottom of the prairie. We've had work outings to cut and treat buckthorn and black locust. We cut small aspen trees and girdled the larger ones. We used the double-cut method again this summer to eliminate sumac and aspen on the prairie without using herbicides that could harm surrounding prairie plants. We stacked burn piles of the cut brush and burned the piles in the snow last winter. All of this work has substantially increased the size of the prairie and the buffer into which the prairie will eventually expand. We've pulled or treated non-prairie plants such as giant foxtail grass, crabgrass, reed canary grass, orchard grass, mullein, crown vetch, and bird's foot trefoil. We collected native seed from the prairie and dispersed it in the newly cleared areas around the prairie to aid the restoration in the newly cleared area, without introducing seeds from outside the area. We've removed barbed wire from the property. Design and installation of the interpretive sign on Zoerb Prairie met an important goal. We recently put up signs asking hikers not to use the rogue trail on the prairie, and they seem to be working to decrease traffic.

We thank The Prairie Enthusiasts, the Viterbo Service Saturday crew, Rotary After Hours, many community volunteers, and Ridge and Coulee Conservation for working on Zoerb Prairie in the last year.

Lookout Prairie

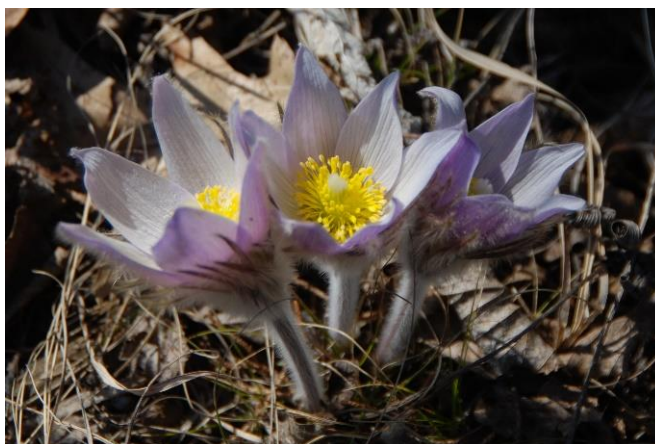
We also made great progress on Lookout Prairie this year. The grant from the C.D. Besadny Conservation Fund of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin allowed us to hire Ridge and Coulee Conservation, who cleared out the steep west side of the prairie and some along the bottom, exposing the rock outcrops. Some of the best prairie species are found there. Volunteers cleared two sections of hardwoods from the main prairie and extended the prairie to the east. The cut brush was stacked and stacks from 2020 were burned in January and February. We cut and treated buckthorn and honeysuckle across the prairie. We cut aspen and birch along the prairie edges. We did a second year of double cutting sumac, reducing the sumac to a small percentage of what it was in early 2019. We've pulled and treated crown vetch. We also put up signs discouraging the use of the rogue trail on Lookout Prairie.



We thank the WisCorps Mayor's Crew, the Viterbo Service Saturday crew, Hawkins Ash CPA crew, UW-La Crosse student projects, the many community volunteers, and Ridge and Coulee Conservation for working on Lookout Prairie in the past year.

Mathy Bluff Prairie

We added Mathy Bluff Prairie to our list of priority projects this year, and the results are already visible from the La Crosse River Marsh trails. It started with Justin Nooker and the WI DNR Natural Areas Crew doing a day of work on the prairie, assisted by some Mississippi Valley Conservancy employees and by Friends of the Blufflands volunteers. Buckthorn and other woody species were cleared from the south side of the prairie and stacked at the bottom of the hill. Since that first outing, we've been back three times to clear more area of the prairie, including double cutting a sumac clone and an outing by the Mayor's Crew.



We thank the DNR Natural Areas Crew, Mississippi Valley Conservancy, and the WisCorps Mayor's Crew for working on this valuable prairie in need of care.

Miller Bluff Prairie

Miller Bluff has had considerable work done in the past year, with Friends of the Blufflands playing more of an advisory role. The Park Dept hired a contractor to clear brush and trees off 6 acres of the prairie in 2019, with a couple follow-up trips in 2020. Friends of the Blufflands advised on work plan development, monitored the work, and helped skid logs off the prairie when the work was done. The Park Dept also hired on contractor to burn the prairie in spring, 2021. The Outdoor Recreation Alliance sponsored a bluff cleanup in summer, 2021, including cleaning graffiti off the cliff. The Outdoor Recreation Alliance is now overseeing the construction of a new trail to the bluff, and Friends of the Blufflands was consulted on trail placement. Friends of the Blufflands installed an interpretive sign at the bluff in August 2021, and will install a kiosk when the trail construction is done. Friends of the Blufflands had a work outing with the Mayor's Crew to cut buckthorn and other brush to expand the prairie.



We thank the WisCorps Mayor's Crew working on Miller Bluff in the past year.

Dobson Tract

The federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee was found on the Dobson Tract last year, and this year Mike O'Brien was able to find a Rusty Patched nest. Locating a nest is a rare occurrence. We monitored the Rusty Patched nest this summer in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Wisconsin DNR, and the University of Minnesota. The nest ultimately was excavated due to its premature decline. The excavated nest is being studied, with further results pending that we hope will aid in discovering what is causing the Rusty Patched Bumblebee's overall decline.



We spread a prairie seed mix in the open field last winter and mowed several times to stimulate the native prairie seedlings this summer. Many native plants are starting to grow there. Hopefully this will improve the habitat for the Rusty Patched Bumblebee and many other native insects and birds. Other work done on Dobson by Friends of the Blufflands in the past year includes six or more outings cutting and treating buckthorn and oriental bittersweet; three outings to cut sumac; pulling garlic mustard and crown vetch; and cutting brush to keep the trail clear.

We thank the WisCorps Mayor's Crew, Viterbo Service Saturday crews, and Arbor Hills neighbors for working on Dobson in the past year.

Mathy, Fitzpatrick, and Thompson Pollinator Prairies

The Rusty Patched Bumble Bee has also been found on the Mathy pollinator prairie. Friends of the Blufflands has been monitoring the recently planted Mathy and Fitzpatrick pollinator prairies for invasive plants such as reed canary grass and crown vetch, and planning how to control them. We've applied herbicides in spots, and mowed Fitzpatrick at a strategic time to control these invasives. We mowed fire breaks and cleared around trees at Mathy and Thompson in preparation for prescribed fires that didn't happen this year due to weather.



Lookout Savanna

Friends of the Blufflands is working on creating an oak savanna adjoining Lookout Prairie. Savanna ecosystems are much decreased from pre-settlement times and may be rarer than prairies in Wisconsin. Lookout Savanna is an area of oak woodland with an understory that has been dominated by invasive buckthorn. In the past year we've cut and stacked the buckthorn and started to clear the trees from the cliff between Lookout Savanna and Lookout Prairie.



We plan to do foliar spraying to eliminate buckthorn regrowth and burn the brush piles.

We thank the WisCorps Mayor's Crew for working on Lookout Savanna in the past year.

Interpretive Signs

Ten new interpretive signs were installed in the blufflands this year, the result of a collaboration between Mississippi Valley Conservancy, the La Crosse Park Department, and Friends of the Blufflands, with funding from MVC's Love the Bluffs grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation. Friends of the Blufflands volunteers did the physical installation of the signs, four signs on the Mathy Tract, two in Hixon Forest, one on Miller Bluff, two on the Skemp1 tract, and one on the Skemp2 Tract.



Other Activities

Friends of the Blufflands did brush cutting, trash pickup, and improvements to the trailheads at Lower Hixon, Mathy, and County B last year. We put river rock around the Mathy kiosk to keep weed growth down.

We cut and treated a large black locust clone in the field across from the weather station. The clone extended into the surrounding woods, and it took considerable effort to eliminate it.

Outside of La Crosse blufflands, Friends of the Blufflands volunteers helped Onalaska Park Department employees clear buckthorn at Humfeld Summit in Green's Coulee.

Bluffland Conservation Fund

Working with contractors on clearing Lookout and Zoerb Prairies showed the value that professionals can bring to our restoration efforts. The Board voted to establish a Bluffland Conservation Fund to raise money for hiring contractors to complete work in the blufflands. There is \$6,000 in the fund now, contributed by board members. Your contributions toward our bluffland restoration efforts are most welcome.



Website

Friends of the Blufflands established a website this year – www.friendsoftheblufflands.org. Have a look at the educational blog posts on the site. We thank Corey Minor and Josh Franke of Moops Design for assistance in setting this up.

Board of Directors

Friends of the Blufflands has an active board of directors committed to improving the area blufflands. They've spent considerable time working in the field, leading 1,200 hours of volunteer labor in 2019 and over 2,000 hours in 2020.

There are seven members – Pat Wilson (President), Jon Rigden (Vice-president), Pat Caffrey (Treasurer), Stephanie Hanna (Secretary), Sunshine Love, Mike O'Brien, and Fred Skemp. Two members stepped down from the board this year – George Arimond and John Knight. We thank them for their service and their continued dedication to preserving the regional blufflands.

Thank You

In conclusion, thank you for your support in the past year, and we hope you can participate in a work outing supporting these important projects in the coming year.