

# Friends of the Blufflands Annual Report

August 2020

This is a report of Friends of the Blufflands activities since our June 2019 annual meeting. We're happy to report that we're still making good progress on our goals in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope you are also doing well during this stressful time.

The board decided not to have our traditional in-person annual meeting this year because of COVID-19. 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.

## 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, encourage native species
- Preservation of rare and endangered species
- Advise on trail placement and construction
- Keep in natural state (undeveloped)

## Partners

Friends of the Blufflands is working with many partners to achieve our goals.

### La Crosse Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department

Friends of the Blufflands has worked closely with the La Crosse Parks Department. First as a member of the Environmental Leadership Forum to advise the Park Dept on issues affecting our natural resources. More recently, Friends of the Blufflands and the Park Dept signed 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. The results of our cooperation will be shown in the project work below.

### Mississippi Valley Conservancy

Friends of the Blufflands is a partner with MVC in their Love the Bluffs campaign that's finishing this year, financed by a grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation. MVC helped provide publicity and volunteers for our work outings. The results of that partnership are shown in the project accomplishments listed below.

## **Bluffland Coalition**

Friends of the Blufflands is a member of the Bluffland Coalition – an organization composed of local municipalities and non-profit organizations committed 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.

## **Viterbo University, WisCorps Mayor's Crew, UW-La Crosse, Rotary After Hours**

Friends of the Blufflands has worked with volunteer crews of Viterbo students on Viterbo Service Saturdays, with crews from UW-L clubs and departments, with the high school students on the Mayor's Crew financed by the City of La Crosse and supervised by WisCorps, and with Rotary After Hours. These crews contributed many hours of labor and were responsible for much of what we've done in the past year. Unfortunately, COVID has slowed the efforts a bit this spring and summer, though the Mayor's Crew was still active.

## **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.

## **US Fish and Wildlife Service**

We've also worked with the USFWS through their Partners for Fish and Wildlife program to complete habitat restoration projects on private lands, with some funding also from the National Audubon Society. USFWS was most helpful on the Lookout Savanna project.

## **Projects**

### **Skemp2 Reforestation Project**

Reforestation efforts are going well. The old field at the corner of County Roads F and FA is now planted to trees, mostly oaks. In the past year we've pruned the trees, staked up trees that were bent over, added more cages and fixed existing cages that keep the deer from browsing on the trees, moved cages to smaller newer trees when the caged trees get large enough to get by



unprotected, mowed and weed whacked the weeds and grass competing with the young trees, and cut invasive species like buckthorn and treated them with herbicide, extending into the adjacent woods to create an invasive-free buffer zone. We also put up bluebird houses this year where bluebirds successfully fledged young. Goldfinches and Yellow Warblers have also nested here. This will eventually be a new oak forest extension of Hixon Forest.

We thank Viterbo students for working on Skemp2 on two Service Saturdays in 2019.

## Zoerb Prairie

Friends of the Blufflands has made Zoerb Prairie a focus of our prairie restoration efforts, with the goal of creating a showcase dry hill prairie for the region. We've cooperated with Jim Rogala of The Prairie Enthusiasts to write and carry out a management plan for the prairie. The double-cut method was used this summer and last to eliminate sumac on the prairie



without using herbicides that could harm surrounding prairie plants. We've pulled crown vetch and hound's tongue by hand. We're treating reed canary grass. We've cut and treated buckthorn and other woody species on the prairie and cut buckthorn in the surrounding forest to create a buffer zone. We've cut and treated the black locust trees on and around the prairie. We've girdled the aspen trees on and around the prairie. Aspen, black locust, and sumac are clonal species that are hard to kill unless all the trees are cut and treated to kill the roots. We are expanding the prairie to the east and west by cutting woody species along the prairie edge. We've removed barbed wire from the property. We've moved brush and cut logs off the prairie. We've burned some of the brush piles, and other brush piles will be burned this winter.

We thank UW-L Physical Therapy students, the Mayor's Crew, and Rotary After Hours for working on Zoerb Prairie in the last year.

## Lookout Prairie

Lookout Prairie was also being invaded by sumac. We cut all the sumac on the Prairie in August 2019 and did a double cut of the sumac in 2020 over the entire prairie. We've also pulled crown vetch and cut and treated buckthorn and other woody species. The photo shows the woody species invading the prairie. There's considerable work remaining to remove them.



We're developing a management plan for this prairie that will include eliminating woody species and controlling invasive species across the prairie and into a buffer zone around the prairie.

We thank the Mayor's Crew and volunteers recruited through MVC's Love the Bluffs program for working on Lookout Prairie in the past year.

### **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 dominated by invasive buckthorn. In the past year we've cut and stacked the buckthorn, burned the brush piles in the winter, and applied herbicide to any regrowth. There's considerable work to do to establish this savanna joined to Lookout Prairie. Eventually we can use prescribed burning to maintain both ecosystems.



We thank the Mayor's Crew, Viterbo students on two Service Saturdays, and the USFWS for working on Lookout Savanna in the past year.

### **Miller Bluff**

Friends of the Blufflands had two work outings in the past year to cut and treat buckthorn along the entrance road/trail to Miller Bluff. The La Crosse Park Dept hired a contractor to clear trees and brush from Miller Bluff Prairie. Friends of the Blufflands assisted this process by reviewing the Request for Proposal that the Park Dept sent to prospective contractors, by meeting with the Park Dept and the chosen contractor at the site before work started, by monitoring the work, and by helping to get cut trees off the site after the work was complete.

We thank the Mayor's Crew and Viterbo Service Saturday volunteers for working on Miller Bluff in the past year.

### **Fitzpatrick Pollinator Prairie**

The Park Department paid to have a pollinator prairie planted on the Fitzpatrick tract this year. Friends of the Blufflands assisted by mowing and advising on herbicide to help prepare for sowing seed, by advising on the seed mix required and the planting plans, by removing coiled barbed wire from the site, by following up after the planting to monitor and spray weed patches, and by assuring that weeds don't move into the site from the County Rd FA right-of-way.



### **Mathy Pollinator Prairie**

Over the past year Friends of the Blufflands mowed the trails at Mathy. Along with the Park Department, we did considerable work clearing weeds and trees around the parking lot and the trailhead and one of the trails. We're eliminating thistle, wild parsnip, and Japanese Knotweed from the

parking lot area. We added river rock to the area around the kiosk. Friends of the Blufflands did a bird survey of Mathy and discovered that Henslow's Sparrows that were discovered in 2018 were present again in 2020. Friends of the Blufflands reviewed the Request for Proposal prepared by the Park Dept for contractors to burn and apply herbicide to the prairie to give prairie plants an advantage.

We thank the Mayor's Crew and Viterbo Service Saturday volunteers for working on Mathy in the past year.

### **Dobson Tract**

Exciting news on Dobson this year is that Friends of the Blufflands discovered the federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee on the site, and it's been verified by the WI DNR. We've also seen and photographed the Rusty Patched Bumble Bee on the Mathy Tract, but it hasn't been verified by the DNR yet.



We can hope this is due in some part to the work Friends of the Blufflands has done in the past year on prairie and old field at Dobson. We've cut and treated buckthorn, pulled garlic mustard and crown vetch, and mowed the old field/pollinator prairie to encourage prairie plants. We provided input to the Dobson management plan written by the Park Dept and are executing the management plan.

We thank the Mayor's Crew and Arbor Hills neighbors for working on Dobson in the past year.

### **Other Activities**

Friends of the Blufflands reviewed and commented on the Grandma's Gateway project proposal. We consulted with Mississippi Valley Conservancy on interpretive signs. We GPS'd the boundaries of the bluffland prairies to include them in maps. We supervised a Mayor's Crew outing to clear and beautify the County B trailhead. We supervised the Mayor's Crew to clear the buckthorn along the Hickory Trail from the Lower Hixon parking lot. We're monitoring and maintaining the McBain Tract tree plantation.

Friends of the Blufflands recently purchased a power brush cutter/clearing saw to increase our capacity/efficiency in clearing invasives.

### **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 1,000 hours year-to-date in 2020.

Two members were added to our board this year – John Knight and Mike O'Brien. We thank them for their commitment to preserve the blufflands. That brings the number of board members to nine – George Arimond, Pat Caffrey (Treasurer), Stephanie Hanna (Secretary), John Knight, Sunshine Love, Mike O'Brien, Jon Rigden (Vice-president), Fred Skemp, and Pat Wilson (President).

## **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.