

THE SPROUT

NICHES LAND TRUST | SUMMER 2020 | VOLUME 24 ISSUE 4

Problems in Common | Summer | The Power of our Presence

“... I did my darndest, and in it you have my measure” - Charles Deam

Executive Director Update

“2020, what a year it has been for us all. I hope that all of you are doing well in the challenging and introspective year that continues to impact us in so many ways. NICHES vision for our 25th anniversary celebration and associated activities for this year were turned upside down, and those impacts have limited how we get together to share in the wonder of the natural world. We have continued to work on the land by ourselves and in groups of twelve or less: pollinating orchids, removing invasive species, planting and caring for trees, removing trash from creeks, creatively saving rare species genetics, collecting seed for the Williams Woods restoration, acquiring additional lands and connecting outdoors at a distance in celebration of fireflies, rare flora, and poetry. We may be wearing masks now, but 2020 has largely seen NICHES in pursuit of those things that we have always strived for, healthier ecosystems and broadening our connection to the natural world and to each other. There is something reassuringly pleasant about the seasonality and regularity of collecting seed and controlling each invasive species in its time, in a world that has seen so much change.

On a personal level, the changes in the year have seen me spending more time with my immediate family and engaging in stewardship in my own woods at home, which has seen some quality progress in controlling sassafras. The time and work has helped ground me and connect me to the things of value in my life. I hope that the tumult of the year has allowed a space for you to reflect and find a silver lining that positively impacts your life.”

**-NICHES Executive Director,
Gus Nyberg**



Hand pollination of Orange Fringed
Orchids at our Fisher Oak Savanna
Preserve in Jasper County
Photo by: Chad Phelps

What Happened Over the Summer

During August and September NICHES staff and volunteers conducted 3 cleanups on Big Pine, Wildcat, and Sugar Creek. Maintaining trash free local waterways helps preserve the environmental potential and scenic beauty of our most sensitive habitats!



Thanks to our creek cleanup sponsors!

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How many conservationists does it take to put on a Zoom conference event? After plenty of preparation and 2 test runs NICHES hosted our first ever online Black Rock Society celebration on September 19th. Participants were able to join breakout sessions hosted by NICHES staff and friends with topics ranging from endowments to our fire program.

Problems in Common

On my way out to work at Kohnkes' Little Pine Valley in late August, I helped a box turtle across the road. While trying to keep Japanese stiltgrass under control, throughout the day, I spotted four more eastern box turtles. Japanese stiltgrass is now present all through the lower Little Pine Creek Valley, and at all of our properties along the Big Pine, floating in from infestations upstream.

After identifying and immediately beginning control of the species at Kohnkes' Little Pine in 2016, I found it further upstream on a private property and with permission found it on another property and began controlling it by hand pulling and string trimming. I ended up doing this for several landowners as a service to the valley, for no charge. I thought that I had found the original source and worked for a few years in a row to try to eradicate it in the early stages of the infestation. Unfortunately, no one else joined in the control or truly understood the threat that the species presents. Somehow the infestation was slightly worse each year, despite my efforts to remove every plant. It turns out the original source was further upstream.

This grass will form a monoculture along the streambanks and will slowly creep up the valley over the banks from the creek and will be moved through the animal trails, and human trails, until it covers the upland forest as well. I have seen it happen in southern Indiana and battled it there.

Japanese Stilt Grass

Identification:



Structure: Japanese stilt grass is a prostrate to erect, sprawling and freely branched summer annual with spreading stems that root at the nodes.



Leaves: key characteristics are a silvery midrib and an asymmetrical leaf shape.

Treatment:

Non-chemical: Japanese Stilt Grass has a weak root system and is easy to pull by hand.

Chemical: For large patches a foliar spray chemical treatment may be necessary.

I have seen mountainsides covered on the east coast, acres consumed by a smothering mat of annual grass, pumping out seed that will last for at least 7 years in the seedbank and will eventually exclude everything else, even tree regeneration.

As of last year, I have not been able to help any other landowners in the Little Pine area or in the upper drainages of Indian Creek where I had been offering help previously to those affected by the first infestation in Tippecanoe County, recorded in 2011. I must spend multiple days each growing season carefully treating on several NICHES preserves to keep them in check, while the infestation expands on the properties around us. It's being moved by water, but also by vehicles, heavy equipment, and sometimes your boots if you went hiking where this species was established before hiking on a NICHES property.

We do have some populations that have been held in check by hand pulling for 7 years now, returning multiple times per year to carefully scan and pull every stem. Not an easy task, and every year there is always a small lingering amount. That means when a place is overrun, it will take at minimum of a decade with full careful attention and multiple pulls per year to eradicate. For most private landowners, that is realistically not going to happen from what I have observed. Even people that care. People are too busy to work for the earth, and for the most part they don't understand it. Almost no one can name a species of grass in the forest, so those that don't belong aren't noticed until it's too late. Even if an infestation is discovered early on, it's hard for people to see it as a threat until it has become overwhelming.

These turtles are resilient, but an invasive monoculture of a grass that they have never seen will not make their already difficult existences any easier. Losing plant species means losing insect species and declines in soil fauna. Loss of larger animals will follow and ecosystem services like pollination, dispersal and even water infiltration, things that we take for granted now, will be put into jeopardy.

We have exploited all of the world around us to attain lifestyles of comfort, detached from the knowledge of where we come from. We are lost and distracted. The responsibility is with us to bring science and understanding of the natural world into our lives as humans, especially if you own a natural area. Things are probably in worse shape than you may realize. My approach is to try to inspire through example, but I am appealing to others to be the ones to inspire. Take the initiative to make an impact and bring someone along with you in the mission.

- NICHES Stewardship Director,
Bob Easter



Summer Adventure Camp

“For 3 weeks in July, I had the privilege of running our summer nature camp for local kids 11-14 years old. With the events that have been unfolding globally for the last 6 months, this opportunity to get outside, explore, and have fun was more essential than ever. Camp is by far one of the most fulfilling aspects of my position here at NICHS. Watching young faces light up with excitement as a critter is discovered under a log or a jewel weed seed pod explodes gives me a simple yet deep rooted hope for the future of conservation. Similar natural experiences afforded to me in my own childhood have helped guide my journey into conservation both professionally and spiritually as an adult. I know in my heart that passing this knowledge and passion on to receptive, inquisitive, and creative minds is the most impactful thing I will do with my time here on earth. Our relationship as a society with nature has always been in flux. Wonder and respect, learned best at a young age, has always been the common thread that ties us to it.”

-NICHS Volunteer and Outreach Coordinator, Sam Cody

“Camp this year was really fun! My favorite moment was either starting a mud fight or when we were hiking and it began pouring rain on us. Sadly, this was my 3rd and final year of camp. Along the way I’ve learned how to canoe, made friends, and found a LOT of turtles, snakes, and salamanders.”

-Sophie (age 14)



“This was my first time coming to Summer Adventure Camp with NICHS, and it was awesome! My favorite activity was hiking at Portland Arch and my favorite thing we found there was a village of crawdads. I really like fishing so it was cool when we caught an 8 inch catfish by hand in Big Pine Creek. I can’t wait to come back again next year!”

-Connor (age 11)

“I really liked camp! I loved making wood-fired pizzas, swimming, and walking through the creek searching for crawdads. When we got to feed crickets to the salamander that was something I had never done before. Being in nature can be relaxing or exciting and you can experience new things when you go outside.”

-Madelyn (age 14)





Thanks to our Camp Sponsors!

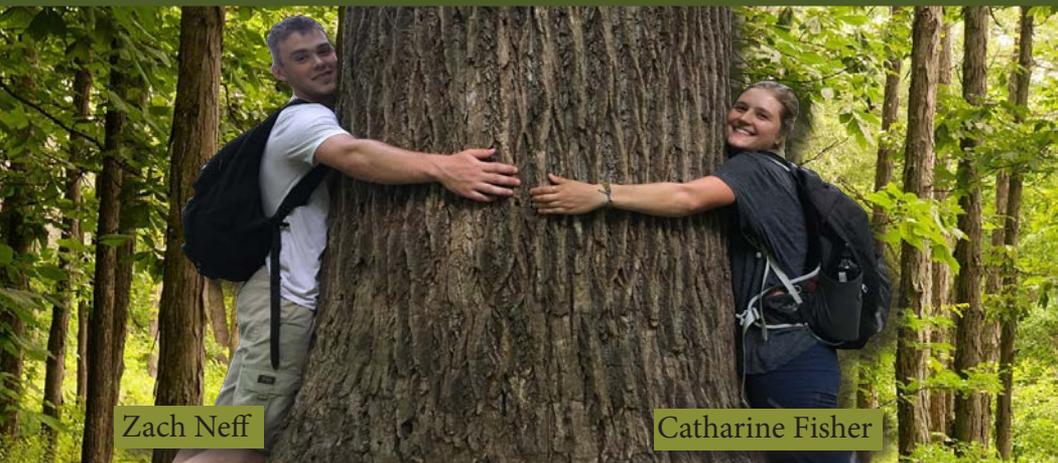






Meet our Summer Interns!

"I'm currently a sophomore at Purdue University majoring in Natural Resources and Environmental Science. I have been volunteering with NICHES since last fall both as an individual and through Purdue's Environmental Science Club. I had heard early-on about the potential to intern over the summer and I knew right-away it was something I wanted to do. A large part of my internship was spent learning about stewardship and working to manually, chemically, and mechanically remove invasives. I also helped to collect / spread native seeds, transplant trees and sedges, hand pollinate orange fringed orchids, lead floats on local creeks, conduct 3 weeks of kids summer camp, co-lead an orchid hike, and helped direct volunteer workdays. My time with NICHES has shaped my future and affected my outlook on conservation by reinvigorating my passion for nature and solidifying my future plans to pursue a career in land conservation and ecological restoration." -Zach Neff



Zach Neff

Catharine Fisher

"Interning with NICHES, I realized that conservation work is never finished, and it gives us a lifetime to connect with both the natural world and the people who protect it. It was really great to explore prairies, forests, and creeks with NICHES summer campers, learn plant identification, and work alongside staff / volunteers to rehabilitate habitats these past few months. In August, I interviewed West Lafayette landowners to write a feature article, 'The Power of our Presence', on the stewardship work they are doing on their properties. As a senior English writing major at DePauw University, this project showed me the potential of combining my interests in writing and environmental disciplines as a potential career path. Talking with these landowners, visiting one of the only populations of the heart leaved plantain, and seeing the pristine blooms of purple fringed orchids are a few of many highlights of an incredibly meaningful summer." -Catharine Fisher

The Power of our Presence

Story Collected and Crafted by NICHES Intern: Catharine Fisher

Ninety-six percent of Indiana is privately owned. Landowners are crucial participants in healing and managing the landscape for the benefit of native species. Each landowner managing their land with plants and animals in mind is providing an important piece in the vitality of the broader natural landscape.

“I didn’t have a master plan,” George Parker admitted, “other than I wanted to minimize the amount that I actually had to mow.” In 1971, when George and Mary Lee Parker bought their property, it had been heavily grazed and dominated by blackberry brambles. They immediately planted 1,500 Christmas trees to generate income, working around patches of things George thought were important, and watched as the surrounding flora continued to develop. Fifty years later, the Parker property hosts close to 50 of Indiana’s native tree species, maples fit for tapping, red fox, weasels, flying squirrels, and nesting sites for countless species of birds. Released from the constraints of agricultural management and with a guiding hand, the land has rewilded itself.

“Out of the total 8.5 acres we now own,” George said, “probably less than an acre has been impacted or not allowed to grow naturally. But my hands are still in all of it in terms of directing it a little bit.” He has removed honeysuckle, built a retention pond, burned the prairie and planted natives like leatherwood, dogwood, and white pine. The biotic diversity is startling proof that guidance and time can make a habitat out of seemingly nondescript land.

“It makes a difference if you know what you’re looking at,” George said. “My experience in ecology—I was at Purdue for 37 years teaching forest ecology, dendrology, management of forests—that background really determines what people see when they look at the natural landscape.



George holding a photo of the property when it was purchased (taken from the same spot)

It's hard to know how other people might have reacted to the same property," he said, standing in front of a forest that might have been mowed. "I saw this potential of what it could be and have tried to add to it over time."

Less than a half mile away from the Parker's property, Jill Evans has been adding and taking away from her 14 acre property to help native species regain control of the ecosystem. Her land is another humble yet essential plot of private ownership extending the positive impact on natural habitats.

"Oh, it's the most amazing thing!" Jill stood in her backyard with her border collies under a silver maple, peering at the ground that sprouts countless wonders. "Right here, all the way through the moss, is now covered with spring beauty. One year I decided I'm not going to mow and let it go to seed, so every year it gets bigger and bigger and bigger," she said. "And prairie trillium popped up in my yard here in the last couple years. So, I'm letting things take over!"

Jill's property is continually progressing and, like anyone connected with their land, she anticipates its impermanent nature. She talked of the woodland oaks that over shaded her pussytoes and firepinks, and of the viburnum slowly demanding more space in her yard. She pulls out once-planted nonnatives like winter creeper and vinca and adds native hardwoods, sedges, grasses, and flowers in their place. With a psychology degree and a horticultural background, she describes herself as a generalist who is learning and unlearning, planting and replacing nonnatives to bring her property to an improved native state.

"There's a lot to take care of for one person," Jill admitted. A few years ago, Jill hired a retired neighbor to help remove mature honeysuckle and treat resprouts.

"Having the opportunity to provide opportunities for life to happen is just really gratifying," she said. "I hope whoever comes after me will continue. I might make it a stipulation," she added with a laugh. "This land is a gift that we've been given," she said, leaning on the gate of her tree enclosed driveway, "so we want to make it better. Better than when we got here."

Less than a quarter of a mile down the lane from Jill's property, Jim and Liz Solberg are on a focused pursuit to improve their 10 acres. For these landowners, "pristine" is used as a verb. Distinct lines separate pristined forest from jungles of honeysuckle along their $\frac{2}{3}$ miles of trails. Pristining happens through a deliberate process of pulling and clipping sprouts, cutting larger bushes with a chainsaw, and dabbing stumps with glyphosate, bringing more than sunlight to the ground.

"In addition to the aesthetic benefit," Liz said "it's what's keeping us healthy. It is such a crucial part of keeping us both happy and healthy."

The Solberg's bought their property in 1971 when it was primarily pasture and hay field but didn't start managing for invasives until their retirement a decade ago.

They had liked the dense underbrush and didn't realize its harm at the time.

"It took us a while to appreciate how hard it is to get rid of," Jim recalled, referring to the honeysuckle, "and same for garlic mustard and poison ivy." "Honeysuckle was everywhere, just solid on our property when we started," Liz said, "it's really very inspiring to see the new growth come. When you start to see pictures of trillium and this and that—the kinds of things that naturally grow in an Indiana forest that have been so impacted because of the agriculture and honeysuckle—you think, 'oh my goodness, might we get some of those back?' And of course," she added with a smile and triumphant arm pump, "the delightful answer is 'yes, we have!'"

While walking through their ravine, the Solbergs shared stories of fox dens, their children and grandchildren playing in the woods, and seasonal change of sassafras and maple leaves vibrantly painting the autumn.



A patch of Jim and Liz Soldberg's woods that was cleared of invasives last spring. A wall of honeysuckle in the background marks where the front line has been moved.

Liz, Jim, and their nearby landowners know the slow joy of the natural world and seasonal change around maples dripping sap, wood poppies blooming out of boulders, and grass seeds maturing. They have learned that not all green is good, and stepping into the ancient system of life connects us to ourselves, other conservationists, and the natural world. People have power in their presence in the natural world. And through the growing patchwork of private land and NICHES properties, the natural world is beginning to rejoice in its new reservoir of biological, creative, and healing possibilities.

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“Each spring, NIPSCO supports local non-profit organizations with environmental restoration and education projects throughout northern Indiana through funding from NIPSCO’s Environmental Action Grant. We appreciate the fine work NICHES Land Trust accomplishes by improving the quality of all life by preserving the land, air and water in our region. We are delighted to support the Whistler Woods Restoration and Interpretive Project in 2020.”

- Karen McLean,
NIPSCO public affairs manager.

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You Help us Reach our Goals!

2020 Goals Update *(End of August)*

250 new members at a special rate of \$25: 158 of 250

25 members giving at \$2,500 (or more): 22 of 25 committed

Campaign Goal: \$180,777 of \$250,000 raised

Help us share the love

Bob Rohrman Subaru Share the Love Event is taking place from November 19, 2020 to January 4, 2021. Planning on a new Subaru? Your purchase can help support our work. Past Share the Love Events have raised over \$50,000 for NICHES Land Trust!



Thank you to our Additional Sponsors!



Driggs & Associates



"My name is Andrew and my fiancée Christine and I would like to thank NICHES for protecting lands in west/central Indiana. During the pandemic we've taken advantage of many NICHES properties and brought our dog along too, enjoying the hidden gems in this corner of the country. Along the way we've become members of NICHES and even volunteered in May to pick garlic mustard at Gladys & Al Wright Rock Creek Nature Reserve, which we recently returned to. In our most recent visit to Rock Creek, Christine & I got engaged. Completely secluded in the Indiana wilderness on Rock Creek, I got engaged to my favorite person in the world and the love of my life. So, we just wanted to thank you all for the work you put in to preserve these wild places for everyone to enjoy."



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