

## Social Work Meets Ecological Restoration



GREAT PLAINS RESTORATION COUNCIL

Senior Pastors Rudy and Juanita Rasmus of St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston donated the land for Esteban Park. Rudy (center) poses with Jarid Manos (second from left) and others involved with the restoration.

The Texas-based Great Plains Restoration Council (GPRC) is a leader in pairing restoration ecology with social work by engaging at-risk youth and previously incarcerated homeless men and women in restoration projects. This spring it plans to break ground on transitional housing for some of its program participants, allowing them to pay rent through restoration work. GPRC's founder, Jarid Manos, says living at GPRC's Esteban Park while restoring its native coastal prairie will deepen participants' immersion in the program. He adds that local and national service organizations are increasingly emphasizing the need for transitional and permanent housing for the homeless.

"These urban prairie cottages will be green-designed and nice, allowing qualifying workers a place to call home while they move through the program. They are the caretakers of the place, and it corresponds with our principals that by taking care of others, we take care of ourselves," Manos says.

The council's Restoration Not Incarceration™ program integrates ecological restoration training with personal rehabilitation, with help from social workers and ecologists from partner organizations. Program participants are restoring endangered coastal prairie habitat on the site, as well as establishing wetlands, an ADA-compliant nature trail and a community garden and farmers market.

For more information see [www.gprc.org](http://www.gprc.org).

## Connecting Women Agricultural Landowners

Women agricultural landowners are on the rise. According to an Iowa State University study, women own 47% of the state's farmland, and one in 10 acres is owned solely by a woman over the age of 75. The trend is similar in other Midwestern states, according to the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), which describes a typical female farmland owner as someone 65 or older who has inherited her farm from a spouse or parent and rents it out to a tenant farmer.

In 2009, WFAN began convening women non-operator landowner "learning circles" in Iowa to connect female landowners with conservation education and resources. WFAN gradually added learning circles in other states, and now offers them in Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Indiana and Illinois, with support from a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) grant and local partners. (See [womenscaringfortheland.org](http://womenscaringfortheland.org).)

"This program connects women landowners to other women in the same position, and connects them to resources they need to achieve the goals they have for their land," says Jen Filipiak, American Farmland Trust's Midwest natural resources conservationist, who facilitates learning circles in Illinois. For example, one landowner who learned about cover crops at a learning circle subsequently connected with the NRCS and an agricultural university to engage her tenant farmer in a cover crop study, Filipiak recalls.

Within a year of attending Iowa learning circles, about 60% of participants take at least one conservation action on their land, according to a WFAN follow-up study.



Women farmland owners and resource experts in Iowa convene for a "learning circle."

WOMEN, FOOD AND AGRICULTURE NETWORK

# Birds Draw Supporters to Preserves



BILL MOSES

The 2014 “Birds of Natural Lands Trust” calendar features lovely photos by Bill Moses, including this scarlet tanager.

2014 is the Year of the Bird for Natural Lands Trust, operating in eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey. It decided to use bird photographs by long-time member and volunteer Bill Moses to make a “Birds of Natural Lands Trust” calendar for members. “Once we landed on the calendar idea, a workshop program grew out of it with the help of our preserve staff,” says Director of Communications Kirsten Werner. “We hoped to engage new members by starting with ‘Birding 101’ and then encourage current members to try new ways of enjoying the preserves if they were not already bird enthusiasts.”

The launch of the birding workshops corresponded with the 60th anniversary of Natural Lands Trust, founded by a group of birders working to prevent an oil company from dumping dredge waste into marshland that is now a National Wildlife Refuge.

The land trust began the workshop series in November 2013, priming participants for spring birding field trips and an informal competition to spot the most bird species in 2014. •

## Private Lands Provide Essential Bird Habitat

The 2013 edition of the “State of the Birds” report, an annual assessment of the status of U.S. bird populations submitted by 15 bird conservation organizations and government agencies to the U.S. Department of Interior, focuses on the crucial role of private land protection in sustaining bird populations.

It lauds government programs that support private land conservation and land trusts for their vital role in working with landowners to secure, restore and conserve habitat for American birds.

According to the report, more than 100 U.S. bird species have 50% or more of their populations on private lands, and many of those species are in decline and in desperate need of habitat conservation. Land trusts are particularly important players in conserving private lands for bird habitat in the eastern forest, grasslands and western forest regions.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, one of the report’s authors, launched an initiative in 2013 to collaborate with land trusts on conserving bird habitat on private lands.

“We are using interviews and surveys to thoroughly understand how we can best work with land trusts so birds, land trusts and communities benefit,” says Ashley Dayer, conservation social scientist for the lab. “We expect to roll out our collaborative initiative and resources beginning in fall 2014.”

To read the report, visit [www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org). •

## Birding Trail Creates Regional Attraction

The coastal wetlands along Lake Huron’s Saginaw Bay are not universally appreciated, even by locals, says Zachary Branigan, Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy’s executive director. Not everyone understands the critical role wetlands play for a cleaner lake by acting as a natural filter, or that they offer opportunities for recreational uses, such as kayaking and birding.

That is the primary reason the conservancy planned and created the Saginaw Bay Birding Trail, which links 50 existing parks and preserves along Lake Huron’s Saginaw Bay into a regional tourist attraction. The extensive coastal wetland system around the bay includes land trust preserves and local, state and federal parks and natural lands. The area is a critical migration stopover and nesting site for a diverse array of birds.

The 142-mile trail, which debuted in 2013, is marked by “hotspot” signs to highlight the birds and coastal habitat (including a QR code for smartphones to link to a website), a field guide and a physical hub for the trail in downtown Bay City.

“We’re trying to draw people in to understand and appreciate the unique natural qualities of our region,” Branigan says. “When you say ‘wetland,’ many people think ‘regulatory obstruction.’ But then you take them out on a 200-acre site and they see 75 different species of birds—then they get it.” •

## Growing School Lunches – and Garden-Savvy Students

**A** \$100,000 USDA grant to Athens Land Trust in Georgia will increase the amount of food grown on school properties and served in cafeterias, and educate children about agriculture and healthy eating.

The grant builds on the organization’s extensive partnerships and programs. In 2010, the land trust and its partners started a network of community gardens to increase access to fresh vegetables and fruits. They also developed a “market garden,” where low-income gardeners produce food to sell at a farmers market at a vacant, historically black school. University of Georgia students, the university’s Cooperative Extension service, students of an alternative high school and others donate more than 5,000 volunteer hours a year to the market and gardens. The market garden will serve as a distribution and processing hub for school cafeterias, bringing in produce from school gardens and local farms.

In a school district where more than 80% of students qualify for free or reduced school lunches, the nutrition department’s interest and support in integrating local and school-grown produce into meals has been essential, says Nancy Stangle, Athens Land Trust director emerita. The district nutrition staff has come up with child-friendly recipes for produce that can be grown year-round in the



SUSAN CRISWELL

Students work in a garden bed at Gaines Elementary School in Athens, Georgia.

region. School gardens go hand-in-hand with the revised menus. “Studies show that when children are engaged in growing vegetables, they are more likely to eat them,” says Stangle.

A large component of the grant will support classroom teachers to venture into the garden as a part of their science and math curriculum.

The school gardening and food effort supports the land trust’s comprehensive vision of smart land use, ranging from providing affordable housing to promoting urban and rural agriculture and protecting natural lands, Stangle says. “Essentially we see land as a community resource that needs to be stewarded and used in a way that benefits everyone. It is important to protect natural resources, urban forests and farmland, and we also want to meet community needs.” •

## Facebook Adds Direct Donation Feature

**I**n December 2013, Facebook began facilitating direct donations to 18 large nonprofit organizations, including The Nature Conservancy. “Donate now” buttons on the organizations’ profile pages allow Facebook users in the United States to quickly put their money where their “likes” are.

It’s not clear when and if additional nonprofits will be able to add this feature, but Facebook is gathering a list of those that express interest at [facebook.com/help/224906417682965](https://www.facebook.com/help/224906417682965). •

## Volunteerism Grows as Donations Remain Flat

**A** December 2013 Gallup Poll on Charitable Giving shows that while 83% of Americans donate their money to charitable organizations, giving to nonreligious nonprofits has been flat since 2005. On the brighter side, volunteerism is at its highest ever, according to the poll, with 65% of Americans giving their time to one or more charities. See [www.gallup.com/poll/166250/americans-practice-charitable-giving-volunteerism.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/166250/americans-practice-charitable-giving-volunteerism.aspx). Also, see the volunteer article in this issue on p. 26. •



DAVID FOSTER

Houses perforating forestland in Massachusetts

## Massachusetts Forests in the Balance

**A**n acre-by-acre analysis of Massachusetts forests by Harvard University and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute shows that if development trends continue, they will undermine forestland conservation gains in the state, jeopardizing water quality and natural defenses against climate change.

The Massachusetts study ([harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/changes-to-the-land](http://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/changes-to-the-land)), released in December 2013, outlined four possible 50-year scenarios of land development, wood harvesting, conservation and agriculture, using sophisticated computer models.

At risk are all the benefits forests provide, such as climate protection, clean water, wood products and wildlife habitat, says David Foster, director of the Harvard Forest and co-author of the study. "The results of this new study show that seemingly imperceptible changes to the land add up in ways that can significantly enhance or erode these vital benefits, depending on the choices we all make."

In the best-case scenario of four projected outcomes, the study says that careful land use planning and forest improvement techniques could increase the amount of wood harvested while protecting water quality, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat.

The National Science Foundation is funding an extended study to include the five other New England states. •



JOHN C. JESSOP

Members of the YMCA Y-Guide program's "Kwakiutl Tribe" gathered for a "Kwak Mudder" to raise funds for New Canaan Land Trust.

## A Muddy Run for Conservation

It's not every day that a community group holds an unofficial fundraising event for a local land trust, but that's exactly what a Connecticut YMCA father-son group did for New Canaan Land Trust. In November 2013, 6- to 8-year-old boys and parents of a YMCA "Y-Guide" group requested donations for the land trust from friends and family, and then the boys ran a 1.25-mile "Mudder" on a land trust preserve.

"Throughout the course we had them trek through a bog, tightrope across a large fallen tree, carry logs up a hill, army crawl through leaves, climb stone walls and bushwhack up a hill to the finish line," John C. Jessop, a parent, wrote in a letter to the land trust. The group raised nearly \$800 and reported perfectly muddy conditions for the event.

"We were thrilled by the seemingly spontaneous effort on behalf of the trust, and by the fact that boys were getting out in the woods," says Chris Schipper, president of the land trust. 🌿