



CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS

Fall 2025 Newsletter

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THE BEGINNINGS OF A LAND CONSERVANCY

In August, COL hosted its Annual Benefit among the blooming prairie and shaded back-dune forest of Jeanie Van Nice's lakefront property in Lakeside (see page 5 for more on the event). Jeanie, along with her late husband, Peter, is one of COL's four founders. In fact, the organization was formed around the kitchen table in the very house where the Benefit was held. It was a fitting setting, as this year's Benefit raised funds for the acquisition of a new nature preserve to be named in honor of Jeanie, Peter, and fellow founders Jean and Steve Smith: the Founders Preserve.

“

Our family's story has unfolded on this land for generations. Preserving its unique beauty ensures future generations will know it too.”

- COL Founder, Jean Smith



Emily Coolidge with founders Jean Smith, Steve Smith and Jeanie Van Nice at the 2025 COL Annual Benefit

Walking through the Van Nices' restored prairie, it is hard not to feel inspired by the beauty of the landscape. That sense of connection to the land and the deep love of it is what sparked Peter's vision for a conservancy dedicated to protecting our region's natural places.



The VanNice property during the 2025 COL Annual Benefit

But this story starts 80 years ago.

At that time, the land where supporters gathered for the Benefit was part of a homestead farm owned by Bushrod Brown. The Van Nice family later purchased the property and divided it into smaller parcels. Peter's parents, Ruth and Errett Van Nice, were given the 10 acres that Jeanie still owns today.

Guests enjoy strolling the VanNice property grounds during the 2025 COL Annual Benefit



An avid gardener, Errett transformed the land with his family over several decades. Peter and his brother Paul spent their childhood helping their father plant trees, tend gardens, and develop their own love for the outdoors.

In 1967, Peter and Jeanie married and spent summers at the Lakeside home with their sons, Errett and Anthony. By then, Peter was an avid conservationist with a growing interest in prairie restoration. Together, he and Jeanie began cultivating a prairie of native grasses and wildflowers on their own property.

After retiring in the late 1990s, Peter became increasingly concerned about the growing wave of development in the area. The popularity of the region was threatening to reshape its natural character. He and Jeanie began envisioning a land conservancy in Berrien County. Their neighbors and close friends, Steve and Jean Smith, quickly joined the effort.

Chikaming Open Lands was incorporated in December 1999 and soon acquired its first property, the 5-acre Eleanor O'Connor Wilson Woods Preserve on Lakeshore Road in Lakeside.



Peter Van Nice in the prairie he carefully cultivated in Lakeside, Michigan

Peg Kohring Cichon, then the Midwest Director for The Conservation Fund, provided invaluable guidance in those early years, helping the founders learn how to protect land strategically and sustainably.

From there, Peter, Jeanie, Steve, and Jean worked tirelessly to bring Peter's vision to life. What began with a few acres and a shared dream has grown into a thriving land trust with dedicated staff, offices, and dozens of protected natural areas.



COL's first office in 2006, located in Lakeside, MI

As we work to establish the Founders Preserve, COL carries



forward the same passion and determination that began in one family's backyard and has blossomed into a legacy of conservation.

Thanks to your support, COL will continue safeguarding the woods, prairies, and wetlands we treasure so they endure for generations to come.

BOARD MEMBER FEATURE



Kate Bensen discovered and fell in love with Harbor Country in 2005 and happily became a Michigan resident in 2020. She received her AB in Economics from the University of Chicago and her JD from Loyola University Chicago School of Law. After many years practicing law as a public and corporate finance partner, Kate embarked on a new chapter and retired as CEO of the Chicago Network in 2020.

Passionate about land conservation, Kate enjoys hiking COL's many preserves, golfing, and walking the beach. Robinson Woods is her most-visited preserve, though she has recently fallen in love with Myron Perlman Nature Preserve and Burns Prairie Preserve. "Being in nature is one of the best things you can do," Kate says, "and COL makes it possible for anyone to experience nature up close."

BENEFIT RECAP

Nearly 300 guests and supporters gathered on Saturday, August 9 for another unforgettable Annual Benefit, hosted at the beautiful home of Jeanie Van Nice.



From the live music to the vibrant flowers, signature cocktails, and incredible food, Cocktails & Coreopsis was a resounding success. Together, we raised more than \$200,000, with more than half going towards the Founders Preserve acquisition campaign. This new



preserve will be named in honor of COL's founders: the late Peter Van Nice, Jeanie Van Nice, and Steve and Jean Smith.

It was a truly beautiful evening and a heartfelt celebration of everything COL works to safeguard and protect. None of it would have been possible without our dedicated volunteers, generous sponsors, and auction item donors. Thank you for making this night such a success!



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incredible event
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A GROWING IMPACT

FOUNDERS PRESERVE CAMPAIGN

Chikaming Open Lands is nearing the finish line in its effort to acquire an 87-acre tract of forest, wetland and former agricultural land on Three Oaks Road in Chikaming Township. Thanks to the success of our Annual Benefit, we are now (at time of print) less than \$100,000 away from securing the remaining funds to purchase the property, which will be named in honor of our Founders. Scan the QR code to help us cross the finish line by making a gift today!



CHAPMAN FAMILY PRESERVE PROPERTY

Thanks to the generosity of former landowners Thomas and Eileen Chapman, COL acquired 31 acres of forested ravines, wetlands, and former vineyard along the St. Joseph River in Royalton Township (pictured on cover). This marks COL's first preserve in this part of Berrien County, with anticipated opening in Spring 2026.

To learn more about these properties and ongoing projects, visit: chikamingopenlands.org.

THE QUIET WORK OF PROTECTING DAYTON WET PRAIRIE

Down a quiet country road in Bertrand Township lies a place few have seen: Dayton Wet Prairie Preserve. Chikaming Open Lands acquired the 40-acre site from The Nature Conservancy in 2011. Split between two parcels on Curran Road, it is small but ecologically significant: a rare remnant of Michigan's lost wetlands, shaped by mineral-rich groundwater, seasonal flooding and fire. With nearly 50% of the state's original wetlands gone, Dayton Wet Prairie endures.

Within these wetlands, uncommon species still survive, from Michigan lily and fringed gentian to the DeKay's brown snake and sedge wren. Some are so sensitive, and unfortunately so coveted, that we do not share their names publicly. Their presence makes Dayton Wet Prairie both fragile and among the most important places COL protects.



Above, fringed gentian; below, Michigan lily



In an ecosystem as rare and delicate as Dayton Wet Prairie, stewardship demands both caution and commitment. The same water that sustains the fen also makes it difficult to manage. With no off-road vehicles allowed, most work is done on foot - or even by drone, as when reed canary grass was treated this year. Each visit is purposeful: monitoring seasonal changes, documenting wildlife or addressing new challenges.

Guided by the preserve management plan, first written in 2011 and updated in 2023, COL has steadily restored



McCoy Creek at Dayton Wet Prairie

the prairie through invasive species control, habitat management and long-term monitoring.

DAYTON WET PRAIRIE (cont.)

Tackling Invasives

- Phragmites: Non-native stands are controlled with herbicide, cutting and controlled burns, preventing small populations from spreading.
- Shrubs: Buckthorn, multiflora rose and encroaching native dogwoods and willows are cut back, while select shrubs remain along McCoy Creek to stabilize banks.
- Thistle and Reed Canary Grass: Targeted spraying gives native grasses, like cordgrass, room to thrive.



COL Conservation Specialist, Alex Schrader, hand-wicking invasive phragmites

Habitat Management

- Controlled Burns: Controlled burns reduce woody growth, recycles nutrients and encourages native plant growth.
- Native Seed: Seed collected on-site and spread in restoration zones diversify and strengthens rare species, including native phragmites.



Controlled burn at Dayton Wet Prairie

Wildlife

- Butterflies: Annual butterfly surveys contribute to the Michigan Butterfly Network's understanding of population trends.
- Reptiles: Regular surveys have found multiple protected species including at least one rare turtle and two rare snakes.
- Birds: Breeding bird surveys with the Berrien Birding Club confirm Dayton Wet Prairie as a birding hotspot, with sightings from sandhill cranes, cedar waxwings and warblers to bald and golden eagles. Species of special concern, such as the red-shouldered hawk and prothonotary warbler, have also been recorded.



Some of the most important places we protect are the ones you may never see.

In addition to other management efforts, cleanups and new signage discourage dumping while some previously disturbed areas have been reseeded with native plants. Some results, such as cleared thickets, are immediate. Others are more subtle, like a cedar plank dam that slows water through an old ditch, restoring natural hydrology and helping the ecosystem flourish.

Most people will never visit Dayton Wet Prairie, but its protection benefits all. Its wetlands filter water into McCoy Creek and the St. Joseph River, shelter rare species and safeguard a piece of Michigan's pre-settlement landscape that cannot be replaced.

Stewardship here is muddy boots, patient monitoring and deep respect for the land. This quiet but hopeful work allows rare plants to bloom and clean water to flow.

Want to see this rare landscape and help make a difference?

Join us for our October Stewardship Day at Dayton Wet Prairie! No experience required.

October Stewardship Day: Dayton Wet Prairie

Sat. Oct 11 | 10 AM - Noon ET

Join us as we work to restore this unique wet prairie which has become overgrown with invasive shrubs. Bring your boots and good cheer. Many hands make light work and your help will go a long way toward protecting this incredible landscape.

RSVP to Stewardship Manager Dan Engel at dengel@chikamingopenlands.org or 269-405-1006.

2025 FALL PROGRAMS & EVENTS

Mushroom Hike

Fri. September 26 | 10 - 11:30 AM ET | Merritt & Younger Family Preserves

Join COL as we hike through a mature forest with fungi expert Charlie Haven to learn all about our local mushrooms and other funky fungi!

Registration is open.



Fall Migration Hike w Joshua Duis

Thur. October 2 | 8:30 - 10:30am ET | Chris Thompson Memorial Preserve

Join local birder Joshua Duis, a lifelong Berrien County resident and Berrien Birding Club committee member, for a guided hike to explore the wonders of fall bird migration. Out birding nearly every day, Joshua brings a deep knowledge of local wildlife - especially birds and native plants - and a passion for sharing nature with others.

Registration is open.

Witch Paddle

Tue. October 7 | 2 - 5:30 PM ET | Galien River Marsh

Grab your broomsticks (or paddles!) and join us on the water for a Witch Paddle as the Harvest Moon gets ready to rise. Costumes encouraged as we fill the river with witches, warlocks and plenty of Halloween spirit. COL has a limited number of kayaks available for those who do not have their own.

Registration is open.



Events and Programs require pre-registration.

To register for a program, contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator Grace at gball@chikamingopenlands.org

To view the full events calendar, visit
chikamingopenlands.org/events.

Captures & Coffee: Fall Photography Hike

Sat. Oct 11 | 8 - 11 AM ET | Sugarwood Forest Preserve

Join Mari Maloney of Capture Studios for a fall photography hike. Explore the autumn landscape while learning tips for getting the most out of your SLR camera.

Registration is open.

Enchanted Forest

Thur. Oct 23 | 4 - 7 PM ET | Robinsons Woods Preserve

Join COL for an evening of spooky [not scary] family fun! This Halloween event will feature activities for all ages, including a costume contest, pumpkin painting, and a whimsical trick-or-treat through an enchanted forest.

Registration opens 10/1.

SUMMER EVENTS & PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS



Top row: #10Trail Challenge participant photos. Middle row: June Pride Paddle and July Kayak & Brews. Bottom row: Harbert Community Church Camp, Wildflower Photography Hike and June Stewardship Day.



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