



CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS

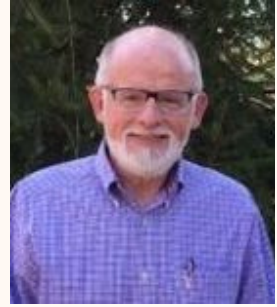
Winter 2023 Newsletter

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Dear Friends,

A quarter century brings significant success and holds great promise. In 1999 Chikaming Open Lands (COL) was incorporated with its mission to preserve and protect open spaces in southwestern Michigan. Although it held no property, hosted no events, and employed no staff, a strong vision of the possible was established by our two founding families.



Today COL is a robust land conservancy. Over 2,100 acres have been protected forever, including 21 preserves with miles of trails for visitors' enjoyment. The calendar is filled with multiple educational and outreach programs for all interests and ages. The Mighty Acorns program teaches elementary students the importance of protecting the natural habitat. All these activities are overseen by a professional staff of six assisted by dozens of volunteers and supported by hundreds of donors. Nationally accredited, COL is recognized as a significant voice for protecting the area's distinctly natural character.

We are now looking ahead to the next quarter century of conservation success. Initially focusing its work in four townships, COL's service area is being expanded to twelve. New properties are being acquired with the goal of at least one preserve in each township. Expanded ecological programs and additional recreational opportunities, such as access for people with disabilities, are being planned. Investing in this work will forever be rewarded with a vibrant natural setting for future generations to enjoy. Thank you for your continued support. You brighten the area's future landscape.

David Eblen
COL Board President

CREATING CONNECTION YEAR-ROUND

A walk through the woods today is an entirely different experience than the same walk a couple of months ago—and that doesn't have to be a bad thing.

The temperatures might be lower and the days might be shorter, but nature is still open for you to enjoy. There is plenty of magic to be found in the quieter and less verdant forest: bare branches against blue skies, glittering snow, and golden brown beech leaves hanging in the balance are just a few of the delights you might encounter while visiting a Chikaming Open Lands (COL) preserve this winter.

While we completely understand that cold weather isn't everyone's cup of tea, we also know that it is important to find ways to allow people to connect with nature regardless of the season. There is no such thing as "perfect timing," and you never know when or how someone might find their reason for caring about the lands we protect.

It could be the way the sunlight hits the snow. Maybe it's a walk in the woods on a rainy day. Perhaps it's the first spring ephemeral sighting of the season. Maybe it's coming home each summer and taking those first steps onto your favorite preserve. If you're anything like us, you might continuously be collecting new reasons. The point is, that "why" is different for everyone.

Making Lasting Outdoor Memories

That variability in experience is one of the main reasons we strive to offer a diverse selection of events and programs that showcase our unique properties during all four seasons. As we outline our calendar for 2024, we're thinking back on 2023 and considering how we can make the next year even better. You've likely heard of some of our repeat, large-scale events like the #10Trail Challenge, but maybe you're not as familiar with some of our newer events and programs. Read on!

This year's most popular new program was our Kayak and Brews summer series. We partnered with Ghost Isle Brewery to bring groups of 10-20 people out for kayak tours of the Galien River Marsh once a month from June to September.



A Kayak and Brews Attendee Paddling the Galien River Marsh

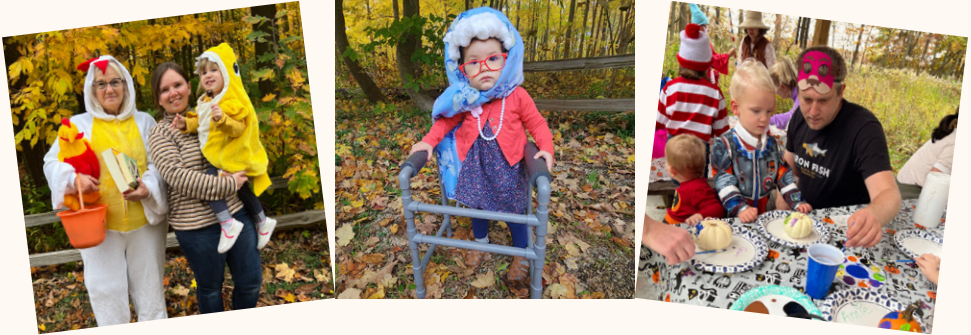


Event Attendees at Ghost Isle

After the tour, participants visited Ghost Isle to continue the camaraderie and discuss COL's work. The program engaged a total of 67 participants, many of whom were new to COL and have since become more involved and connected. There are no hiking trails on the Louis J. Sima Great

Lakes Marsh Preserve or the Merganser Point Preserve (the two Galien River Marsh properties protected by COL), so this program aids in displaying their incredible features while also utilizing the fleet of kayaks we received in 2022 with grant funding from The Pokagon Fund. Stay tuned for additional exciting kayaking programs next summer.

Our second annual Enchanted Forest was among the year's other notable successes. This family-friendly Halloween event is put on in partnership with The Rotary Club of Harbor Country and invites the community to Robinson Woods and Flynn Woods Preserves for pumpkin painting and a trick-or-treat hike along the haunted trail.



Trick-or-treaters didn't just get candy—they also took home native seed packets donated by Stantec, books from Harbor Country Rotary's bookmobile, and read educational nature facts along the way. Despite persistent rain, we still had **167 people** in attendance! For some, the experience marked their first time visiting a Chikaming Open Lands preserve.



As we plan for 2024, we look forward to creating more connections like these. By facilitating positive outdoor experiences, we hope to inspire people to return and explore the preserves on their own. Showcasing the accessible, natural settings that exist in the community and demonstrating their ease of use firsthand can encourage those future connections.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

“Wait, listen. Did you hear that? Red-shouldered hawk. Oh, and there goes that red-bellied woodpecker again!”

As we walked through Sugarwood Forest Preserve, Jackie Jensen transitioned between answering questions, pointing out any wildlife or interesting plants she noticed, and sharing anecdotes about living in Southwest Michigan and her experience with Chikaming Open Lands (COL). Jackie has been volunteering with COL as the preserve steward for Sugarwood Forest Preserve, located in Three Oaks, since 2020.

“I met Dan (COL’s Stewardship Coordinator) at a birding program on the Galien River Marsh. That was my first introduction to COL. By the end of the program, I was asking how I could get more involved.” As luck would have it, COL had recently acquired Sugarwood and was looking for a volunteer to serve as the preserve steward.

Since 2020, Jackie has demonstrated impressive dedication to COL. She visits Sugarwood frequently during all four seasons, not only to fulfill her preserve steward monitoring duties, but also just for enjoyment. “It actually has turned out to be my favorite COL preserve,” she laughed.

Preserve stewards are asked to visit their preserve quarterly. They look out for any changes (positive or negative), pick up garbage, report down trees, trim back invasives, and help our stewardship team with projects when they need extra hands.

In addition to being a preserve steward, Jackie regularly attends COL's monthly stewardship days and offers to help wherever we need it—Sugarwood or not.

Jackie moved to Union Pier in 2014 to be closer to wildlife and nature, so she is especially passionate about the importance of land protection. The opportunity to be involved firsthand is



Jackie Jensen, Sugarwood Forest Preserve Steward

one of the main reasons she loves working with COL. Another is the knowledge she's gained. She still remembers attending her first stewardship day at Merritt Family and Younger Family Preserves and listening to the other volunteers rattling off the names of various plants and birds. "I felt so daunted," she said. Now, after only a few short years, Jackie is happy to have become more confident and well-versed.

“Remembering all the different names for plants and wildlife is kind of like learning several different languages,” said Jackie. “It’s been so rewarding to figure out how to speak them.”

COL truly could not accomplish the work we do without the help of volunteers like Jackie. We are endlessly grateful to have her and our entire community of volunteers and donors to help us fulfill our mission to preserve and protect open spaces throughout Berrien County.

A GIFT THAT LASTS FOREVER

A self-described conservationist, Elizabeth Leonard Rould truly loved the woodlands of SW Michigan.

She and her husband, Ed Leonard, lived on more than 100 forested acres at Warren Woods and Lakeside Roads for 35 years. She spent much of her time walking in the woods with her dogs.

“I didn’t ever want to leave,” she said. But when Ed passed away in 2006, she knew the property was going to be too much for her to manage alone. She portioned off a small parcel containing the house and sold it, but maintained ownership of the surrounding 108-acre woodland. She knew she wanted to see the



Elizabeth Leonard Rould

land preserved—but she also knew that if she sold it, there was a distinct possibility it would be developed. She’d been approached by people who wanted to do so on several occasions. So she made the decision to donate the land to Chikaming Open Lands (COL).

Initially, she planned to leave the property to COL in her will. But the following year she decided to donate it immediately, while she was still living and able to see it protected—and to take advantage of the tax benefits the donation afforded her. COL closed on the land donation, valued at over \$1 million, in 2018.

“It’s very important to me to know that other people, young and old, will be able to walk through (these woods) and really enjoy (them) just as I did,” she said at the time. COL opened the Edward & Elizabeth Leonard Wildlife Preserve to the public in 2020.

However, the story doesn’t end there. While she ultimately decided to donate her land during her lifetime, she had still included COL in her estate plan. When she passed away in October 2021, COL received a bequest of more than \$750,000. The funds were designated to improvements and ongoing stewardship of Edward & Elizabeth Leonard Wildlife Preserve, COL’s Board Designated Endowment Fund, and to support future efforts to forever protect the natural open spaces of our region.

COL has made a commitment to care for its protected lands and waters in perpetuity. Through her estate gift,



Elizabeth was able to create a lasting legacy, ensuring that future generations can enjoy these beautiful shared landscapes just as we do today.

“I’ve always considered the land and the people of this area as a gift to me,” Elizabeth said. “I wanted to make a gift back to the community, for the enjoyment of everyone.”

Leave a legacy that will preserve our cherished natural places FOREVER.

Including Chikaming Open Lands (COL) in your estate plan is a wonderful way to create a lasting legacy and protect the unique natural, rural character of this special place for generations to come.

Ways to make your legacy gift:

- Make a gift of cash, investments, or other assets to COL in your will or trust.
- Name COL as a beneficiary of your IRA or other retirement plan.
- Designate COL as a beneficiary of your life insurance policy.
- Make a gift of real estate to COL to be managed as a nature preserve, or to be sold with the proceeds supporting our work.

To learn more about making legacy gifts, contact our office at (269) 405-1006.



WINTER EVENTS & PROGRAMS

Snowman Hunt

December 21 - January 21
All COL Properties

Keep your eye out for rogue snowmen hiding out along the trails. Find a snowman, snap a selfie, and win prizes! Watch our social media and website closely...sometimes the mischievous snowmen leave behind clues that help hikers find them more easily.

Winter Tree ID Hike

Sat. January 20
1 pm - 2:30 pm
Leonard Wildlife

Preserve

Explore Leonard Wildlife Preserve with our Executive Director Ryan Postema and learn how to identify trees in the wintertime.

All events require pre-registration.

To register, please contact Grace Fredenburg, Education & Outreach Coordinator, at gball@chikamingopenlands.org.

Scat & Tracks Hike

Sat. February 10
9 am - 10:30 am

Merritt Family & Younger Family Preserves

Hikers will learn how to identify different types of animal tracks and scat while enjoying the winter wonderland.

Maple Tree Tapping

Date & Time TBD
Covenant Farm

Learn about extracting sap and visit the farm's "sugar shack," where the maple syrup is made.

This program is based on weather. An exact date will be set around mid to late February. It is typically the last Saturday in February or the first Saturday in March.

For more information on COL events,

visit www.chikamingopenlands.org/events.



Chikaming Open Lands

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chikamingopenlands.org



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