



# CHIKAMING OPEN LANDS

Winter 2025 Newsletter

- Building Momentum
- From Healing Animals to Healing Habitats
- Winter Events & Programs



# BUILDING MOMENTUM

Highlights from 2025 and what's to come in 2026

## Reflecting on 2025

This year has been one of incredible momentum for Chikaming Open Lands, marked by new nature preserves, expanded access to the outdoors, growing education and outreach programs, and the continued support of our amazing community.

- Two properties protected: Thanks to the generous support of so many in our community, ***we were able to raise enough funds to close on the Founders Preserve property on Three Oaks Road by the end of 2025.*** The Chapman Family Preserve property in Royalton Township was acquired earlier in the year.
- One new preserve opened: New trails, signage, and parking lot were completed at Trillium Woodlands Preserve in the Niles-Buchanan area.
- We started our 10<sup>th</sup> year of the Mighty Acorns program, expanding the opportunity to include homeschool students.



## Looking Ahead to 2026

The year ahead promises even more to celebrate. Plans for improving public access, designating recreational use, and starting habitat restoration are in development for both the Chapman Family Preserve and the Founders Preserve. We anticipate these plans to come to fruition in 2026 with new hiking trails, educational signs, and trail markers in both preserves, as well as a parking area at the Founders Preserve.



Our outreach team is working hard on another full year of old favorites and exciting new programs that educate and inspire. And as always, the work of stewarding lands never ends. We'll continue to tackle invasive species, plant trees, monitor wildlife, and much more.

These milestones represent the collective effort of supporters, volunteers, and partners who make the work we do in Southwest Michigan possible. Together, we're building a legacy of conservation that will shape our community for generations to come. ***Thank you for being part of this journey.***

# FROM HEALING ANIMALS TO HEALING HABITATS

The path through Jens Jensen Preserve was brushed with October color - a ribbon of sand and soil, carpeted with fallen leaves beneath towering oaks and maples. Doug and Julie Morris walked the familiar trail, stopping now and then to lift a fallen branch from the path.

Doug paused to reach out and pull on a grapevine, which we would later learn had significance. Julie smiled, tilting her head back to take in the canopy overhead. "Look up. How beautiful is that?" she said softly. Sunlight filtered through the golden leaves, splashing the trail in shifting color.



*Doug and Julie Morris at Jens Jensen Preserve.*

**After decades of tending to animals, Doug and Julie now care for a different kind of patient: the land itself.**



Both veterinarians by trade, they spent more than 20 years running their own clinic in Granger, Indiana, before purchasing a home in Sawyer in 2019 where they've happily settled into semi-retirement.

"Every time I visit somewhere new, I start by seeking out the natural areas," Doug said.

He didn't have to look far. Just a mile from their home, Jens Jensen Preserve became a familiar destination to walk, run, and explore. That fall, Doug attended a stewardship workday at Dayton Wet Prairie. Soon after, he volunteered to become the preserve steward for Jens Jensen Preserve.

Doug, whose undergraduate studies were in animal biology, has always had an insatiable curiosity about the natural world. After reading the management plan for Jens Jensen, he noticed that wildlife surveys were listed as a goal but that COL didn't yet have the capacity to conduct them. "That really resonated with me," he said. "I thought, well, that's something I can do."

And so he did. Working with COL and university partners through SPARCnet (Salamander Population and Adaptation Research Collaboration Network), Doug helped establish COL's first salamander survey plots. "There's a grapevine out there that I use as my landmark so I can find the salamander plot every time I survey."

A short distance from the salamander plot sits a large downed tree. Doug pointed toward it and said, "That's my breeding bird survey point."



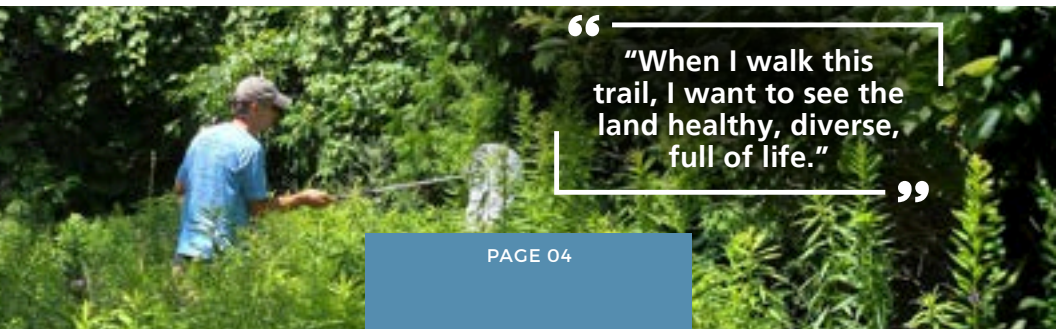
*Doug conducts a salamander survey (above) and bumblebee survey (below).*

Julie smiled. "If it's surveyable, he'll survey it. But his favorite are the bumbles."

**Doug's face lit up with both affection and a touch of embarrassment. "I do love the bumbles," he grinned.**

"Bees, butterflies, birds, salamanders. I love them all. I've always been fascinated by how every piece fits together. You can't just care for one thing; you have to care for the whole system."

As we walked through Jens Jensen, Doug talked about Aldo Leopold, a conservationist who reminded us that people and nature belong to the same community. "That idea guides everything for me," Doug said.



“When I walk this trail, I want to see the land healthy, diverse, full of life.”

*Volunteers like Doug and Julie make it possible for Chikaming Open Lands to do more – not just in stewardship and science, but in connecting people to nature.*

They've helped at events like Kayak & Brews and Mighty Acorns, ensuring that programs remain accessible for everyone to enjoy. "COL hosts so many great events," Julie said. "I love the goat hikes, the seed collecting, and the hikes with local botanists. They make it easy for people to learn and fall in love with these places."

Julie calls herself "team support," but her connection to the preserves runs deep. "Whenever I need peace or perspective, I head out to a COL preserve," she said. "Out here, everything feels balanced again."



*Doug and Julie during a COL goat hike.*

An artist, Julie channels that same feeling into her whimsical, nature-inspired paintings. "We're incredibly lucky to have these spaces in Michigan," she said. "When we slow down and truly experience nature, we understand what's at stake and remember why it's worth protecting."



*Doug moves a snapping turtle out of the road.*

Doug agreed. "People have an innate love for the living world, and you protect what you love. My hope is that these preserves continue to teach future generations how everything fits together and help us grow a deeper, more selfless concern not just for our own species, but for all living things."

**For Doug and Julie, the same compassion that inspired them to heal animals now guides them in caring for the wild places they love. In doing so, they continue doing what they've always done best: healing, nurturing, and helping life flourish.**

# SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN OUR COMMUNITY

## You can use your Traditional IRA to make charitable gifts to Chikaming Open Lands!

By giving directly from your IRA account, you can avoid federal (and sometimes state) taxes on your required withdrawal—and fulfill your required minimum distribution without increasing your taxable income.

### It works like this:

- If you are aged 70 ½ or older, you are able to make donations to COL **directly from your IRA account**.
- You can contribute all or a portion of your IRA distribution to COL or other qualifying charities, up to a total of \$100,000 each year. The **transfer will count toward the required minimum** distribution rule for IRAs in the year in which the gift is made.
- Best of all, there is **no federal income tax liability** in the withdrawal, and there may be state income tax savings as well!

Contact your plan provider to initiate the distribution process.

No matter your age, you can support the preservation of our community's cherished natural places by designating COL as a beneficiary of all or a percentage of your IRA. This ensures the money is there if you need it, and if you don't, it will help ensure future generations can enjoy the rural, natural character of this area just as we do today.

# 2025-26 WINTER PROGRAMS & EVENTS

## **Snowman Hunt**

**December 20 - January 11**

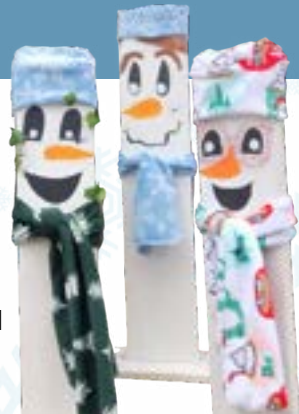
**Various COL Preserves**

### **How to Play:**

- 1) Find a snowman on one of our preserves.
- 2) Snap a photo with it.
- 3) When you share your photo with us, you'll be entered to win prizes!

### **Register and learn more:**

[www.chikamingopenlands.org/snowman-hunt](http://www.chikamingopenlands.org/snowman-hunt)



## **Winter Tree ID Hike**

**Sat. January 24**

**1 - 3 PM ET**

**Myron Perlman Nature Preserve**

Do you have a hard time identifying trees when they don't have leaves? You're not alone! Explore the forest with COL Executive Director Ryan Postema and learn how to identify trees using characteristics like bark, branches, and buds.

## **Scat & Tracks Hike**

**Date & Time TBD**

**Trillium Woodlands Preserve**

Learn how to identify different types of animal tracks and scat while enjoying a winter hike. This program is weather-dependent. Tentatively planned for January; final date will be announced when conditions allow.

## **Maple Tree Tapping**

**Date & Time TBD**

**Covenant Farm**

See how syrup is made! Tour Covenant Farm and learn all about collecting sap and making maple syrup. Exact date will be announced in mid to late February, as winter weather affects when sap flows. This program will likely occur in early March.

## **Events and Programs require pre-registration.**

To register for a program, contact our Education & Outreach Manager Grace at [gball@chikamingopenlands.org](mailto:gball@chikamingopenlands.org)

**For additional details, visit [chikamingopenlands.org/events](http://chikamingopenlands.org/events) and follow us on Facebook for the latest updates.**



# Chikaming Open Lands

12291 Red Arrow Highway

Sawyer, MI 49125

(269) 405-1006

[chikamingopenlands.org](http://chikamingopenlands.org)



NON-PROFIT ORG.

U.S. POSTAGE

**PAID**

SAWYER, MI

PERMIT NO.1