



Ripples

A Publication for Members and Friends
Killbuck Watershed Land Trust

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Holmes Trail upgrade will include section near Brinkhaven Barrens

At our recent board meeting, trustees of Killbuck Watershed Land Trust heard from Tom Alexander, who is a Richland Township trustee and Rails To Trails coordinator and volunteer. He presented information and a timeline for the construction of the Holmes County Trail from Brinkhaven to Glenmont this year. Two conservation lands owned by KWLTL border the Holmes County Trail: a wetland near the village of Killbuck and the Brinkhaven Oak Barrens, a few miles north of the village of Brinkhaven.

The section to be completed this year includes some of the most scenic and steepest land along the trail, as the railroad grade tops over a sizeable ridge separating the two communities. This pass, referred to as Baddow Pass on topographic maps, is derived from Bad Ol' Pass from earlier times when the steam locomotives had to work hard to overcome this low spot along the ridgeline. Sparks from the locomo-



tives were said to have started fires at times, and local fire brigades and landowners were called in to put them out. Pictures of this area from the turn of the last century (the photo above was taken in about 1913) show how open the landscape was at that time in this area of Holmes County. Much of the surrounding countryside has slowly filled in with trees and

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Browns embrace life along Killbuck bottoms

If watching a weasel battle to the death with a muskrat at your ice-covered backyard pond has appeal, you might enjoy the rural life that Keith and Dorothy Brown have been living for the past three decades.

Recently the Browns placed their 9.6 acres of



land under a conservation easement, making them the first KWLTL landowners to protect residential property that borders a tributary of Killbuck Creek.

While their Overton Road home is only five miles from downtown Wooster, it seems worlds away from civilization. Keith bought the property at a sheriff's sale shortly after retiring in 1986 as a professor in the Poultry Department at the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. The Browns built a home on what had been a cornfield and Keith set to work returning the property to nature.

A centerpiece of the backyard is a pond where great blue herons love to fish for bluegills and bass while they avoid the healthy complement

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Promoting, protecting and preserving our natural heritage

Barrens has an unusual and rare plant community

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woodlands where there was once pasture and cropland as the steep topography proved difficult to farm.

As one walks or bikes along the Holmes County Trail today, you cannot help but notice the surrounding woodlands that have replaced the farming of yesteryear. Not all of the old fields and pastures have been replaced by woodlands along this stretch of Rails To Trails.

A few steep south- and southwest-facing slopes contain places where the soils are thin and closer to bedrock and, along with porous sandy soils, have left a few spots where trees have difficulty becoming established. This droughty soil, combined with recurring fires (mostly before 1955) that were used to “green up” pastures in the springtime, has resulted in a few small prairie-like openings referred to as oak barrens in this area.

Since fire is seldom present on this landscape, the oak barrens have slowly been encroached by brush and trees, and are becoming a lost plant community. Early survey records show the existence of these barrens, and these areas were noteworthy because of the lack of trees. The trees and other plants that were present in these plant communities were fire adapted, indicating that they were burned with some regularity.

Two of these oak barrens are persisting and being protected at Brinkhaven Oak Barrens, along with a large tract of woodland and brushy areas reverting to woods. The oak barrens plant community is a link between our historical land use and the land uses of those natives who came before settlement, expressed in the vegetation that persists there. This rare habitat deserves protection as it hosts an unusual diversity of organisms found in a fire-dependent community.

On my last visit to the north barrens I spooked a ruffed grouse – or I should say it spooked me with its last-second flight before I practically stepped on it. There is always something new to discover in places like this, and I am proud that KWLTL stepped in to conserve this site.

Over the past three years work has been done by a team of volunteers from the Ohio Natural Areas and Preserves Association to actively manage the bar-

rens by clearing invasive species and undesirable woody vegetation, clearing firebreaks, and reintroducing fire with a controlled burn in the south barrens.

Work has progressed from the south barrens to the north barrens, which borders the Holmes County Trail. ONAPA volunteers last October and this past February began clearing undesirable woody plants and completed about half of the north barrens.

KWLTL is fortunate to partner with ONAPA in restoring the barrens to a more natural (historical) state. The goal is to conserve and manage this site to preserve an unusual and rare plant community. KWLTL will host ONAPA volunteers at Brinkhaven Oak Barrens on Saturday, Oct. 21, from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. to con-

tinue clearing. Everyone is invited! We will meet at the parking lot on Twp. Rd. 13, just west of the tunnel on Twp. Rd. 5.

KWLTL board members will gather at 2 p.m. to offer refreshments and high praise for volunteers. We want to thank ONAPA volunteers and be available to show off the preserve to KWLTL members.

Plan to attend our annual landowner event at Brinkhaven Oak Barrens where we will showcase what is being done at this KWLTL wilderness preserve. After the volunteer work session, anyone wishing to see the barrens can get a tour at the height of fall color. It should be a fun and educational event.

If you have questions, give me a call at 330-763-4030.

Randy Carmel, KWLTL President



A SECTION OF THE ROVER pipeline construction near Shreve is shown in this photo taken May 17 by Randy Carmel. Hundreds of landowners are affected by the natural gas line that will stretch diagonally across Ohio for more than 700 miles.

Your KWLTL membership fosters land conservation

Your membership in the Killbuck Watershed Land Trust helps to maintain the rural atmosphere that has made our area a desirable and unique place to live. Your 2017 membership dues will be used for:

- Conservation education
- Public outreach
- Land acquisition and management
- Legal action to monitor and maintain conservation easements

Annual membership levels are:

- Friend, \$50
- Steward, \$100
- Conservator, \$250
- Protector, \$500

To become a new member or to renew your membership for 2017, write a check payable to Killbuck Watershed Land Trust. Mail it to Killbuck Watershed Land Trust, 133 S. Market St., Wooster, OH 44691.

Killbuck Watershed Land Trust is a tax-exempt organization pursuant to Section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Service Code. Donations are tax deductible.

In praise of fencerows

Dividing our farm from the farm east of us is a fence. Or perhaps I should say, the remnant of a woven-wire fence held up by a tangle of blackberries, raspberries, wild cherry trees and a myriad of "weeds." This fencerow is unkempt and neglected, but it abounds with wild things.

Even though the fencerow abounds with activity throughout the year, the apex of its life occurs in mid- to late summer with the ripening of the blackberries and wild cherries and the blooming of the goldenrod. Their abundance invites the greatest diversity of creatures, from the colorful locust borer beetles and monarch butterflies on the goldenrod to the late-nesting goldfinches on the brambles, and the many birds and mammals feeding on the berries and cherries.

Brushy fencerows are in a sense a gift from man to nature - at least if, after the posts are dug in and the fence stapled to the posts, nature is given some free rein. Birds sitting on the fence and posts will pass undigested seeds in their droppings. Some of these seeds of blackberry, wild cherry, elderberry, bittersweet, sassafras, mulberry and unfortunately, in some areas, multiflora rose, will take root in the loose soil around the posts and later in soil dug up by the woodchucks. Chipmunks scurrying along the fence will bring and bury nuts while the wind will deliver dandelion, milkweed and thistle seeds - all ingredients for a healthy fencerow.

In the northeast corner of the field that borders the fencerow is a rock pile along with a few broken pieces of plowshares and cultivator points. Next to the rocks are some shoots of serviceberry (or Juneberry), sprouts of a tree likely planted by a bird maybe a century ago.

The serviceberry brings back memories of my boyhood and the neighbor who used to own and till the next farm. He was a farmer of the old school, intelligent, interesting, and full of wisdom, and suspicious of all the newfangled innovations in agriculture. For years he farmed with a Fordson tractor and a team, then finally went to a two-plow Ferguson tractor (new in 1949 from Wirt

Tractor Sales in Moreland). Yet the tractor never really speeded up his life. He always had time to stop whatever he was doing in his fields for a visit with us beneath the serviceberry, a tree he loved, for it was the first to bloom in the spring.

The serviceberry blew down in the blizzard of '78, ten years after the



neighbor died. New shoots are now growing from the stump. The spring after the blizzard, a shellbark hickory sprouted several feet from the serviceberry, at the edge of the gateway between our farms, and today is at least thirty feet high. It is now bearing nuts

The predominant tree along the fencerow, though, is the wild cherry, and, as food for wildlife, it is the most important. In late summer and early fall many different kinds of animals feed on its abundant fruit. This includes the red foxes, raccoons, skunks, opossums, and even deer. Sometimes when hauling wood from stacked piles in late fall, we discover caches of wild cherry pits that deer mice and chipmunks have stored for the winter. Birds, likewise, relish the cherries and feed heavily on them for a month or so. We use them ourselves to make a delicious jelly.

From April through July the fencerow rings with bird song. While we were plowing alongside it this spring, several song sparrows, a pair of bluebirds and a cardinal entertained us. The bluebird

nested in a box across the gateway from the hickory. Later, in May, I spotted a Tennessee warbler and other migrants.

The most important mammal in the fencerow must be the woodchuck. By their penchant for digging burrows, woodchucks provide homes not only for themselves, but when abandoned, many other mammals that use the holes. Most skunks, and many opossums and raccoons, live permanently in woodchuck burrows. Red foxes will also use the woodchuck's home to raise their pups. Should a woodchuck be in the burrow in late winter when the vixen decides on a location, the hapless animal is often killed when the fox takes over the den. Once a burrow becomes flea-infested, the young foxes are moved to a new den where, very likely, another woodchuck will be kicked out.

Cottontails, too, in severe weather seek the safety of a woodchuck hole.

Woodchucks do, however, eat hay crops, soybeans, garden vegetables, and sometimes young corn plants, and so many farmers and gardeners despise them. Varmint hunters shoot thousands each year. But in spite of persecution by dogs, foxes and hunters, this hearty animal is thriving. Last summer when I cut the first round of oats I found four new burrows. As long as there are fencerows, there will be woodchucks.

Fencerows often serve as travel lines for animals, especially deer and foxes, and on hillsides fencerows help to control erosion. Many fields on the uphill side of a fencerow are a foot or more higher than the field on the downhill side. Another benefit of the fencerow is that it is a renewable source of heat for the winter months. In a year or so the bigger trees in our fencerow can be cut and sawed into stove-lengths.

For a fast-growing tree, seasoned cherry is surprisingly good firewood. The wild cherry stumps will quickly sprout shoots, growing sometimes six to eight feet in the first year, and the cycle will be repeated about every ten years. Cutting some of the trees will not greatly harm the value of the fencerow for wildlife, particularly if the brush is

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Browns' wetlands property teems with life

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of snapping turtles and other swamp denizens. There's a bald eagle nest not far up the creek, and Keith remembers a day when he looked out the window at his hammock and saw a juvenile eagle perched there.

The pond appeals to wood ducks and mallards and usually hosts a clutch of goslings raised by an attentive pair of Canada geese. The Browns enjoy watching the many migrating waterfowl and other birds that pass through the Killbuck valley, following the old channel that makes a giant loop along the east edge of



KEITH BROWN shows KWLТ President Randy Carmel the Killbuck Creek tributary that flows in a loop around the border of his property west of Wooster.

Fencerows

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left in piles for additional cover.

Sadly, fencerows have become unfashionable. They began disappearing when the bulldozer became affordable, farm and machinery size increased, and 2,4-D brush killers were developed. Weed killers and clean mowing invite fescue to take over and the fencerow becomes a biological desert. Soon after the demise of the fencerow, hunters began complaining about the scarcity of rabbits and pheasants. The blame was mistakenly put on the fox and the owl.

When we consider tearing out the fencerow, we think of the buck rubs, then the fox den, the possibility of a covey of quail, the serviceberry ... bulldozing this ribbon of life definitely wouldn't be "cost effective." Too much would be lost.

David Kline, KWLТ Trustee

their property.

Keith enjoys gardening even though the clay that makes up part of the yard beyond the pond isn't conducive to growing vegetables. He is enriching the soil in his tomato patch with hundreds of pounds of coffee grounds he got from a Wooster coffee house.

Before moving to Overton Road the Browns raised their family of three sons and a daughter in a historic downtown Wooster house. Today the four, all nearing retirement themselves, live scattered across the country – in Seattle, San Jose, Calif., Kalispell, Mont. and Minneapolis. One Brown grandson loves to catch lunkers in Keith's well-tended pond (that's Keith on the front page, raking out some of the excess pond vegetation). But none of the Brown offspring have an interest in living there someday.

The Browns, who met during grad school at the University of Wisconsin, have many friends made during a lifetime of involvement in the community. After the children left home, Dorothy worked for a decade handling insurance at the Wooster Clinic. Keith, immediately after his retirement at age 62, served as interim Christian educator at Wooster First Presbyterian Church where he and Dorothy have been active for decades.

That led to his seminary enrollment and a brief second career as a Presbyterian pastor. Ordained at age 74, he served five years in Clinton, Iowa and Garden Plain, Ill. The Browns rented their home while they were gone, always knowing that they would return after Keith's service to what he calls their "big carbon sink."

Protecting their land with a conservation easement was an easy decision. Over the years a neighbor has eyed it for frontage expansion of his mobile home cluster. Others would love to build in, or log out, a 2.7-acre roadside section of hardwoods including sugar maple, red and white oaks, slippery elm, cherry and other species.

Even at age 91, Keith remains well equipped to tend to the challenging property. After meeting his post-retirement goal of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, Keith became active with the trail's maintenance program. He volunteered in 10 of the trail's 13 states, spending two to four



KEITH AND Dorothy Brown pose in their light-filled Wayne County home with a wall sculpture created by one of their daughters.

weeks each summer repairing and upgrading sections of trail. While those days are over, he continues his service as a Chester Township poll worker.

Because of its location the house has no basement. And Keith says that if he digs two feet down in his backyard tomato patch, groundwater flows into the hole. A second, slightly higher plot holds asparagus, rhubarb and garlic, none of which are much disturbed by the deer or small mammals that call the area home.

Keith uses an old brush-cutting power push mower to maintain paths around the house and pond while letting nature claim the rest of the property. Among the items on his to-do list is propagating more kinds of flowers that attract pollinators.

In the spring the Browns are in the midst of a huge amphibian migration from the woods across Overton Road down to the old Killbuck channel. Summer brings rainbows of songbirds and raptors, and in fall the house peeks from beneath crimson and gold leaves.

Come winter, there's plenty to watch around the pond. And in case you're wondering, the weasel won.

Melody L. Snure, Ripples editor