

# Ripples

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Killbuck Watershed Land Trust

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## KWLT's Baker Wetlands property is vital link in Killbuck watershed chain

I took a walk through what is known as "Baker Swamp" near Killbuck the other day. My goals were to get some photos of the unique property owned by Killbuck Watershed Land Trust, to monitor its condition, and to begin putting up new signage.

The frozen wetlands are easily accessible at this time of year and I could see across the preserve without vegetation masking the view. Once the frozen wetlands melt, access is more difficult. It can be quite a task in the heat of summer. To be able to really circumnavigate the property quickly, one must come in the winter after prolonged cold weather ensures a frozen wetland.

Arriving at the parking lot for the Holmes County Trail, northeast of the Killbuck rail-



**BAKER WETLANDS**, a 27-acre natural preserve owned and maintained by KWLT, is visible from the Holmes County Rail to Trail north of Killbuck.

road station, I noticed a red-shouldered hawk perched in a large cottonwood at the edge of the KWLT preserve. Its breast feathers were fluffed out, with red shoulders and underparts easy to see. The hawk

ignored me as I began a tour of the property purchased by KWLT in 2006 to protect the scenic wetland corridor along the Killbuck Creek.

About five percent of the  
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## Betsy Sparr joins KWLT Board of Trustees

As a child growing up on a five-acre hobby farm in Wayne County's Chippewa Township, Betsy Sparr learned to love the land. Now, in retirement, she hopes to bring that love and her expertise to the KWLT Board of Trustees following her 33-year career with the Wayne County Planning Department.

Betsy remembers growing up with goats, geese, sheep, a cow and other critters, a menagerie amassed by her non-farmer father who liked to attend farm auctions. Back then

she probably didn't foresee a career in land planning.

After graduating from Chippewa High School and The College of Wooster she accepted a job with the county and her career took off. While ascending the ladder to Planning Department director she led the effort to update the county's comprehensive plan, oversaw the county's tax incentive review council, and served as the Wayne County liaison with the Federal Aviation

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*Promoting, protecting and preserving our natural heritage*

## Sparr hopes to share expertise

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Administration as the county's point person for the Wayne County Airport.

Killbuck Watershed Land Trust was formed in part from Betsy's work with Maryanna Biggio on the Comprehensive Planning Committee and the Farmland Preservation Task Force, from which tools for protecting land were developed.

Later Maryanna volunteered for four years in the Planning Department, doing legwork to move land preservation forward. The two became great friends.

In addition to knowing all the players and speaking the language, Betsy has organizational skills she hopes to employ to help KWLТ move toward accreditation. Having seen the benefits of land trusts in our area and beyond, she is supportive of their goals and wants to help further them.

Among the reasons Betsy and her husband Jeffrey both retired in 2017 (he was an engineer with the Wayne County engineer's office) was to spend more time with their children Lindsay, 25, a registered nurse in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Tyler, 24, a computer networking specialist in Cincinnati.



**BETSY SPARR** (right) gets a tour of the downtown Wooster KWLТ office from Maryanna Biggio, a trustee and former president of the KWLТ board.

And after years of hectic professional schedules, Betsy says, "it's nice getting to know him (her husband) again." The couple enjoy attending College of Wooster basketball games and puttering around on their acre of property that's surrounded by the family farmland where Jeffrey grew up south of Wooster.

In addition to learning the ropes of KWLТ and meeting landowners whose property is monitored in perpetuity by the land trust, Betsy's retirement plans also include plenty of leisure reading, spending more time in the kitchen (she's a great cook, Maryanna says), and adding selectively to her collection of cookbooks.

## Diversity of 27-acre Baker preserve is amazing

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area of the Killbuck Creek Watershed is classified as wetland. Wetland areas are found intermittently throughout the watershed. The most extensive and important of these lie along the banks of the Killbuck Creek for many miles north and south of the Wayne and Holmes County line.

This valuable wetland complex provides habitat for unique wildlife and plant species, and is the largest remaining wetland area in Ohio outside of the Lake Erie region. The valuable functions of the remaining marshes and swamp in the Killbuck Valley dictate that they should be conserved whenever possible.

Wetlands filter impurities and improve water quality by allowing sediments to settle out after flood events. Wetland vegetation aids in the removal of dissolved impurities by absorption in plant tissue, and by binding to plant stems and leaf



**PILEATED** woodpeckers make use of this dead tree in the Baker Wetlands.

surfaces. Valley flooding downstream is reduced as the floodwater spreads out over low-lying areas, reducing erosion of stream banks and downstream flooding.

Since roughly 60 percent of the land use in the Killbuck Valley is for cropland and pasture, the agricultural industry will continue to dominate land use in the

watershed. Many farms in the watershed have located their facilities near streams and are using them extensively for livestock pasture water sources.

These activities along with cropland tillage activities and the lack of cover crops result in sedimentation to waterways, a significant source of pollution in the watershed. Wetland preservation can mitigate and reduce sediment, nutrient, and bacteria loads to streams within the watershed and reduce the effects of agricultural contamination of Killbuck Creek.

I am amazed at the diversity of plant and animal life on the small 27-acre preserve. On my walk I noted areas of emergent marsh, swamp and riparian woodland bordering the Killbuck Creek and small patches of wet meadow and shrub swamp. These wetland habitats are permanently or seasonally inundated and

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# If you yearn for spring, think of morels

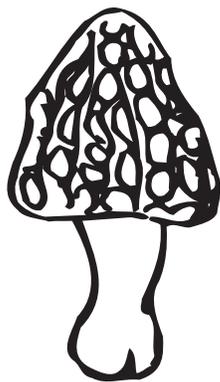
Along about the first of May, when the trilliums and spring beauties and wild geraniums are blooming, the Canada geese are nesting, the bobolinks returned two days before, the Baltimore oriole that morning, one's thoughts turn to mushrooms. Ah, those delectable fungi that, rolled in flour and fried in butter, melt on your tongue and leave you yearning for more, but can be so elusive to find.

There is a certain mystique surrounding the appearance of the morel. Was the winter cold enough, the spring wet enough, the nights too cool, or no thunderstorms to jar them loose? Nobody really knows for sure what the reasons are for a good year of morels, or if they fail to appear, why?

There are three varieties of morels here in the hill country of Ohio: the early long-stemmed kind that has only a small pointy top which will do but one doesn't spend hours looking for them; the early gray or dark morel which take bifocals to locate, and the prize of them all, the large yellow sponge morel. An onion bag of those is worth sacrificing a day's plowing.

When a day or two of unseasonably warm weather with accompanying thun-

derstorms interrupts the spring work, the veteran mushroom hunters seem to be able to smell the morels and they are off to their favorite haunts, usually by themselves. One reveals a good location only reluctantly to even a best friend, and only after solemn promises have been made to not intrude later, or else the honey spot may be lost forever. It is



almost like a prenuptial agreement. Friendships have gone awry over broken morel promises.

A friend and his family once took us along to his morel haven several counties south of us. I promised him I would never go there on my own. I have kept my word. The morning was

slow; a mushroom here and there, but no great finds. In the afternoon we tried another ridge. They went down the south slope and our two daughters and I down the north side. Soon we found a cerulean warbler and followed as it moved downhill.

I was watching the warbler when Emily shouted, "Dad, look here!" Yellow morels six inches tall were standing like sentinels in the early May woodland greenery. With our binoculars we could see mushrooms everywhere in the grove of dead and dying elm trees. After filling our bread bags, guilt overtook us and we called our friends. There were enough for everyone. We ate like royalty for a week.

For the serious morel hunters, dead elm trees with peeling bark are the first choice to check for morels. I used to think it was the dead soft-wooded American elm that produced the fungi, and then I changed my mind to the red elm. I admit, I'm still somewhat undecided whether the red or American is the most consistent producer. Regardless, I check out every dead elm and about one out of ten trees will produce mushrooms.

Not just dead elm trees are hallowed ground to the morel, it varies from season to season. Some years ash trees are good, other years sycamores and old apple orchards. I have a 130-year-old county map of all the farms that shows where the apple orchards are located. A mushroomer's treasure trove.

One of my best springs was in an open pasture that had been home to an apple orchard a hundred years before. Unfortunately, the field was too open and I soon had help gleaning the mushrooms. I did pick several nice messes before the competition made me move on.

If morels were as common as May apples the mystery surrounding their fickle appearance would be lost. But for a week in May we take time to join the excitement of the hunt and wonder why the morel pushing up through the rich leafy humus of the woodlands is always clean.

*David Kline, KWLTL Trustee*

## Support land conservation: join KWLTL today

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 2018 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 2018, 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.

# Wetlands are critically important habitats

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saturated by surface and ground water and support plant species adapted to flooded soils.

Shrub swamp here is interspersed between the open emergent marsh and patches of swamp forest. Frequent disturbances with seasonal flooding cycles and prolonged flooding allow the shrub swamp to persist without trees. Water often pools for prolonged periods of time due to the impermeable clay layer in the soil profile, which limits tree establishment and growth. With extended periods of drought, the water table is lowered which fosters tree establishment and conversion to swamp forest.

The most common shrubs I noted were dogwood, willow, buttonbush and swamp rose. Along the riparian corridor and higher ground is swamp forest with red maple, black willow, American elm, cottonwood and green ash trees. Many of the green ash are infested with the emerald ash borer and will stand as dead snags in the future. It's easy to walk, as ground cover is fairly sparse under the shrubs and trees.

Much of Baker Wetland is composed of emergent marsh, both shallow marsh and deeper, open water composed of narrow and broad leaved herbs and grass-like



**A SOLITARY DEER** left evidence of its trek across the frozen Baker Wetlands.

plants as well as floating-leaved herbs. Of course soft-stemmed plants like these are now lying dormant in the partially frozen mud as seeds, roots, tubers and rhizomes.

On the surface the day I visited only dried stems and leaves, as well as tattered seed heads, could still be seen above the four inches of powdery snowfall we had two days previously. During the growing season water plantains, sedges, spike-rushes, pond lilies, pickerelweed, arrowheads, bulrushes and cattails are commonly observed on a slog through marsh. Some open water also exists in the deeper portions of the "pond" that I was able to walk across on ice cover. The only open water I found was a spring-fed pool at the east end of the preserve. There I noted the only green of chlorophyll to be found.

The shallow margins of the emergent marsh contain considerable plant diversity. Closer to the open water, species diversity is reduced due to deeper water and more anaerobic conditions, and floating and rooted plants like pond lilies, elodea, milfoils, naiads, pondweeds, coontail, stoneworts and small duckweed are found in summer.

The emergent marsh provides habitat for a broad diversity of aquatic invertebrates, many of which occupy and feed on decomposing vegetation. The invertebrates support numerous species of fish, frogs and salamanders, snakes and turtles, waterfowl, water birds and wetland mammals like muskrat, mink and river otter. Wetlands are rich in plant and animal life, providing a wealth of benefits worthy of conservation efforts to preserve our local biodiversity.

Wetlands are critically important habitats in Ohio. At least a third of the rare plant species in Ohio rely on wetlands to survive. A variety of endangered aquatic and terrestrial animals are found here. Fish use wetlands as spawning and nursery areas, reptiles and amphibians breed, waterfowl and migratory birds rest and feed during migration, and many remain to nest here. River otter and many fur-bearing mammals rely on wetlands for the rich food and cover provided by the abundant plant life.

For these reasons, KWLTL has a strong interest in conserving these valuable habitats. Baker Wetlands is easy to see and appreciate if you walk or ride the rail trail northeast out of the village of Killbuck.



**KILLBUCK CREEK** flows through the Baker Wetlands, which is home to a wide diversity of plants and animals. The Killbuck Creek Watershed is the largest remaining wetland area in Ohio outside of the Lake Erie region.

*Story and photos by  
Randy Carmel, President  
KWLTL Board of Trustees*