

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

July 8, 2016

Bob Putze Conservation Easement Article Clyde Township, Saint Clair County

Last month, the Sanilac County News published our press release on the Bob Putze conservation easement near Ruby. The archived article just became available on their web site at the following link:

http://sanilacountynews.mihomepaper.com/news/2017-06-07/News/Be_like_Bob_Putze_preserve_your_land.html

I spoke with Bob yesterday just as he was headed outside for the morning. He has a new baby raccoon friend, and he's been watching coyote pups play along the forest edge across the road. Bob just got a smart phone, believe it or not, and is quickly filling it up with photos of all his animals and natural surroundings. If anyone knows the best way to download or upload photos from a phone without a computer, please let me know.

Clyde Historical Society 2017 Fundraiser Bill Bearss Park, Clyde Township, Saint Clair County August 20, Sunday, 1:00 to 5:00 PM

The Clyde Historical Society will hold its annual summer fundraiser on Sunday, August 20, 1:00 to 5:00 PM at Bill Bearss Park at the northeast corner of Wildcat Road and M-136, across from the Dorsey House. Dinner will include pulled pork sandwiches. As in previous years, there will be kids' activities, including a bouncy house and old-fashioned games. Mark Rucker will provide music. For more information, contact Connie Bates at 810-824-0726.

They are also selling raffle tickets, \$5 for 8 tickets. The first prize is a kayak, which would travel quite nicely on the beautiful Black River with all of our rain lately. Second prize is \$100 cash, which never hurts, and third prize is \$50.

Garlic Mustard Pulls - June 3 and 10 Port Huron State Game Area Clyde Township, Saint Clair County

Thanks again to everyone that participated in our most recent Garlic Mustard pulls in the Port Huron State Game Area. Invasive weed control almost always requires long-term effort, but I think we made significant progress in preventing further degradation of the native woodland flora on a roughly 4-acre piece of the State Game Area. On our second pull, we concentrated on removing any mature Garlic Mustard plants that were missed in the first pull, and then we even started removing the first-year seedlings. But there are a lot and I hope we can hit this area again next year.

Our thanks again to Jim Bearss of Pheasants Forever and the Clyde Historical Society for his coordination and ATV transport, to Jimmy Rankin's Meats <http://www.JimRankinMeats.com> on Lapeer Road in Port Huron Township for their donation of hamburgers and hotdogs, and to John Darling of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for his assistance.



Jim Bearss of Pheasants forever and Clyde Historical Society.



Our TLC web host, Jeff Ronan.



The man who started it all in the Port Huron State Game Area, John Fody.

Algonquin Power Company
12.35-Acre Deerfield Wind Energy Preserve
Huron Township, Huron County, Michigan

Our 2017 monitoring is largely completed for the 12.35-acre Deerfield Wind Energy preserve, about 4 miles west of Port Hope. The final report will be submitted to Algonquin Power and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality later this year. There is still a lot of stewardship work remaining to be done this year, including the control of invasive Japanese Barberry.

As described in previous TLC news, the Deerfield Wind Energy preserve was placed under a State conservation easement as mitigation for wetland impacts resulting from the nearby Deerfield Wind Energy turbine project. 1.235 acre of State-regulated forested wetland was permanently converted to open wetland for the purpose of clearing a 60-foot wide right-of-way for an electrical transmission line. The MDEQ allows preservation of existing wetland, at a 10 to 1 ratio, as mitigation for permitted wetland impacts. This is essentially how we acquired the Dead End Woods and Peltier Beach Ridge Sanctuaries in Fort Gratiot Township in Saint Clair County. The TLC contracted with Algonquin Power in 2016 to provide stewardship of the Deerfield Wind Energy preserve, as required by the MDEQ.

Most of the Deerfield Wind Energy preserve is southern swamp forest with species trending somewhat toward a northern community. Dominant vegetation includes Silver Maple, Black Ash saplings and seedlings, Sensitive Fern, Spinulose Woodfern, Wood Nettle, Clearweed, Lake Sedge, and other sedges. Small upland areas are dominated by Red Maple, Wild Black Cherry, American Basswood, and, unfortunately, Japanese Barberry. Uncommon native plant species include Spicebush and Red Trillium. The preserve is part of one of the larger forest fragments remaining in the Thumb, almost continuous along tributaries of Willow Creek to Lake Huron. As

such, it is not only important for the watershed, but as habitat for migratory birds. While on the site in late June, I encountered several woodland bird species, including Wood Thrush, Veery, Eastern Wood-pewee, Evening Grosbeak, many American Redstart warblers, Common Yellowthroat warbler, Yellow Warbler, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker, a Catbird of course, and a few unidentified species. I'd like to get someone out there who is much better at birding than I am.



Typical swamp forest on the Deerfield Wind Energy preserve. Pileated Woodpecker excavations in the dead ash to the right.

The most critical stewardship issue on the preserve at this point is a dense growth of invasive Japanese Barberry along the east conservation easement boundary, extending roughly 50 feet west into the forest before decreasing to a few scattered shrubs. The barberry growth apparently exploded in the past few years as a result of adjacent forest clearing for an expanded hay field, which greatly increased the amount of light exposure in the remaining forest.



Dense growth of Japanese Barberry.

Another important issue for this preserve, and most of our remaining swamp forest in southern Michigan, is that, with the loss of ash trees due to the Emerald Ash Borer, the canopy is now dominated primarily by one tree species, Silver Maple. If any pest or disease begins killing maples, the vast majority of swamp forest in our region will be without a forest canopy and soon invaded by *Phragmites* Reed. The best we could hope for is that Eastern Cottonwood, American Elm, and willows would quickly colonize these open areas. Other wetland trees, like Bur Oak and Swamp White Oak, simply won't be able to spread fast enough to help prevent this tragedy, and with oak wilt disease gradually expanding, they have an uncertain future. This is a critical issue that I've been writing about for a few years, but I think few are taking it seriously. There doesn't seem to be much hope as things are now, but efforts should be made to prepare for the loss of mature maples. This should include sowing and transplanting of native trees to diversify the forest understory as much as possible. Depending on the landscape, soils, and local climate, these species should include Bur Oak, Swamp White Oak, Pin Oak, Bitternut Hickory, Yellow Birch, Eastern Hemlock, Arborvitae, Blackgum, Sycamore, Tuliptree, American Basswood, Hackberry, and others.

I will be announcing a few stewardship work days for the Deerfield Wind Energy preserve in the fall. I don't think we'll be ready for planting trees yet, but we will be removing barberry shrubs and other invasive species. Thankfully, there is no Garlic Mustard.

Historic North Street Station Clyde Township, Saint Clair County

Work continues slowly on the historic North Street rail station, post office, and general store. We hope to complete installation of the sheet metal roofing soon. We are in need of materials and help, especially when we start painting. A local business may donate some materials, but that's yet to be determined. Contact us if you are interested in helping. We still need to pay for the property acquisition.

Thumb Bioregional Alliance

In a recent discussion, I was reminded of the old days of the Thumb Bioregional Alliance. Some of you were members, including four of our TLC board members. It's been about 18 years since the TBA was active. The group formed in late 1992. It started with former Saint Clair County Drain Commissioner, Fred Fuller, soon after he lost his first election. I remember asking him, "Well, what do you want to do next?" He said something like, "I don't know ... I guess start a bioregional group." Although there were several environmental activists in the region, I think for the first time, the TBA brought those people together in one group. Our three big accomplishments were bringing public attention to a proposed development of the approximately 800-acre Wingford Estate located in the middle of the Port Huron State Game Area, opposing the proposed expansion of peat mining by Michigan Peat Company in the Minden Bog in northern Sanilac County, and opposing full-scale dredging of Mill Creek. All three efforts were successful, given our limited influence.

The proposed golf course, condominiums, and even a hotel and small shopping center, never happened on the Wingford Estate. Thanks in large part to the efforts of Janice Littlefield, who passed away almost 7 years ago, Clyde Township stuck to their master plan and ordinances and rejected the development plans. It's doubtful that the entire project could have been stopped in the long term, but the TBA helped stall it just long enough that a prospective buyer, Ralph Scofield, seemed to appear from nowhere, and soon after, purchased the Wingford Estate. We were all very suspicious, but he assured everyone that he wanted Wingford for his family's residence and that it would revert to State ownership upon their death. The Scofield's turned out to be very generous hosts, opening their forest mansion retreat to the public for various events, such as the Friends of Beard's Hills annual clean-up in the Port Huron State Game Area. Hopefully, Wingford Estate will be permanently protected as a very special addition to State land.

The Minden Bog story is a little more complicated. Michigan Peat acquired part of the bog in a trade with the State of Michigan for some other land they owned. They began mining the bog for peat in the 1960's. But in 1979, Michigan enacted the Goemaere-Anderson Wetland Protection Act, which has been revised but is essentially the same wetland law we have today; Part 303 of Michigan Public Act 451 of 1994. Michigan Peat applied for a wetland permit in 1994 to expand mining beyond 951 acres it already was. In the course of reviewing the application, State ecologists studying Minden Bog discovered that it was a raised bog, the center being about 10 feet higher than the outer edges, and was probably the southern-most raised bog in North America with a unique plant community. In 1995, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources denied the permit application. Soon after, Michigan Peat sued the MDNR for a property taking. But in 1997, the newly created Michigan Department of Environmental Quality reversed the MDNR by issuing a permit to mine nearly 1,900 acres of the bog. But, upon MDEQ permit approval, the proposed peat mine expansion was under review by the US Environmental Protection Agency and US Army Corps of Engineers, who opposed it. Michigan Peat then sued the USEPA. The case was in federal court until 2001 when the final ruling was against Michigan Peat. A 2006 settlement allowed Michigan Peat to continue mining where they had already been, but without any expansion. In addition, Michigan Peat donated 1,182 acres of largely untouched bog to the State of Michigan, which became part of the Minden State Game Area, and they will donate over 1,600 acres of additional land when they are done extracting peat. From the mid to late 1990's, TBA members made public comment to the MDNR, MDEQ, and USEPA. We got other groups involved, and we led public walks through the Minden Bog to

show people this unique natural area. Although we were just a footnote in the Minden Bog and Michigan Peat legal battle, I like to think that our advocacy helped.

Along with the Mill Creek Coalition, the TBA opposed the full-scale dredging and channelization of Mill Creek in northwestern Saint Clair County and eastern Lapeer County. Under the leadership of Terry Gill, now a TLC board member, we spent a lot of time in Mill Creek, netting aquatic macroinvertebrates, identifying them, and calculating water quality scores for different parts of Mill Creek to document the baseline water quality conditions, and later, compare the quality of dredged versus non-dredged sections. Some of our members attended the Intercounty Drain Board meetings to take notes and express their opinions. There was eventually a compromise project with limited dredging, but Mill Creek was largely protected and taxpayers in the drain district saved a lot of money.

It's nice to be able to think back on these environmental successes. At the same time, the world is so tenuous, we can never rest assured these places are protected in the long run. Anyway, I've been thinking that maybe we should revive the TBA, if not for old time's sake, to try to draw more public attention to environmental issues in our region. People often wondered what the "Bioregional" in the name was all about. It can take a little effort to explain, but it's a simple concept of defining a region in terms of the unique physical, biological, cultural, and social aspects that make a place distinct from another, with an emphasis on ecology. Perhaps, a better name might be the "Thumb Environmental Alliance". Rather than TBA, or as we used to joke, "To Be Announced", we would be TEA - no sugar please. If anyone wants to give this resurrection a shot, let me know. These days, it really doesn't take much more than a web site, e-mail list, and a few people following issues and willing to write about them. I'm not committing time and effort beyond what I do for the TLC - "Tender Loving Care". However, the TLC would contribute what we do already to the new group.

TLC Needs Help

The TLC still needs the help of an accountant to prepare an audited financial statement that we can submit with grant applications. We could also use anyone interested in writing grants. Please contact me if you know of anyone that can help.

William Collins
Executive Director
Thumb Land Conservancy
4975 Maple Valley Road
Marlette, Michigan USA 48453
810-346-2584
mail@ThumbLand.org
ThumbLand.org