IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, Volunteering helps Mackenzie Scott stay grounded

From the Executive Director

Resilience. The ability to achieve or overcome in the face of adversity. For the better part of the last year, we have all been forced to reshape our norms, call upon reserves of patience and compassion and deal with loss that has all of us in a multitude of ways. COVID-19 has become the 21st century poster child for adversity. It has forced us to find a dogged grit and determination to overcome it.

Nature has also faced relentless, global adversity. Since the dawn of the industrial era, she has endured the ever-unshakable burden of supporting a surging world population that has grown from two billion to over eight billion people in less than a hundred years—always while natural spaces continue to disappear and our environment has become, for much of the world, less and less of a priority.

The parallels between the two, while apt, ultimately diverge. COVID will, for a while, remain a brutal and heartbreaking reality. However, there will be, eventually, a vaccine. There will be that “other side of the mountain” where we can catch our collective breath, free (at least in the short term) from this microbial scourge. On the other hand, how do we help Mother Nature catch her breath? It’s obviously complicated. Ironically, the COVID-related economic slowdown, if only for a brief moment, teased any hope for a normal school year. “It’s just totally different,” Mackenzie said. “I don’t recognize my job description anymore.’”

This year, things are a bit different. In March, we all kind of thought it was going to be temporary. I remember I switched my calendar and put up April, thinking, ‘We’ll be back in April, I’ll just set up my calendar now,’” Mackenzie said. “And then we didn’t come back.”

Those first few weeks in isolation were difficult, she said. She recalled a string of days when she didn’t leave her studio apartment once. Eventually, she resolved that she had to start getting back outside. “It came at the perfect time. I was hit by the fact that you’ve made, and that’s nice.”

As she prepared for this school year, Mackenzie reflected on what it means to be resilient in a time so full of uncertainty. “You just have to remember why you’re doing it, what the core of what you are doing is for,” she said. “Then you can persevere through all the stuff you can’t control. You can just get through it.”

Mackenzie reflected on what it means to volunteer with the Land Conservancy. “I think that’s something volunteering helps me with: it’s feeling like I can do something. I’m not helpless,” she said. “That’s something that I appreciate about volunteering with the Land Conservancy. It’s going to be out there for a few hours but you can see the difference that you’ve made, and that’s nice.”

The coronavirus pandemic has upended any hope for a normal school year. Mackenzie reflected on how the last year ended:

“Then we made a decision, at the March break, to go spend four days in the mountains. My biggest concern was, ‘Oh, my water filter broke. How are we going to get clean water?’” she said. “It just brought me back down to reality.”

Mackenzie Scott was hooked on volunteering with the Land Conservancy of West Michigan from the first time she tried it. Her coworker and friend, a member of Grand Rapids Young Professionals, invited her along to a special event the organization hosted with the Land Conservancy. The group worked together to remove garlic mustard from one of the Land Conservancy’s preserves.

“I was obsessed,” Mackenzie said. “I really enjoyed it, and I enjoyed the people that were there.”

After that, Mackenzie started attending more of the Land Conservancy’s Saturday Workdays. Mackenzie is a sixth-grade science teacher and the co-leader of her school’s science club. She saw the events as an opportunity to engage her students. Last year, she brought a few students to a seed collecting workday at Saul Lake Bog Nature Preserve and then to a seed planting workday at The Highland.

“My husband and I would try to go to a different trail or park nearby three times a week,” Mackenzie said. “That really did something for both of us.”

Being in nature turned out to be healing, she said. Later in the summer, Mackenzie went on her first backpacking trip in the Porcupine Mountains. “It came at the perfect time. I was hitting another one of those dips where it’s like: We’ve been isolated for so long, and there’s so many unknowns with the school year and my career, and I just got to go spend four days in the mountains.”

Thanks, as always, for all you do.

Joe Engel, Executive Director

Mackenzie Scott

bulletinofnature.org

1.363 land trusts, collectively magnifying our impact on a world sorely in need of clean air, clean water and earth-friendly energy policies. Underlying all of this, of course, is the critical need to ensure equal access to these gifts, for all.

In this month’s newsletter, we reflect on our collective contributions to this global imperative—and the need to foster hope and resilience in the crucial mission of protecting our West Michigan resources forever.

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As she prepared for this school year, Mackenzie reflected on what it means to be resilient in a time so full of uncertainty. “You just have to remember why you’re doing it, what the core of what you are doing is for,” she said. “Then you can persevere through all the stuff you can’t control. You can just get through it.”

Mackenzie said volunteering supports this feeling. “I think that’s something volunteering helps me with: it’s feeling like I can do something. I’m not helpless,” she said. “That’s something that I appreciate about volunteering with the Land Conservancy. It’s going to be out there for a few hours but you can see the difference that you’ve made, and that’s nice.”

More than that, Mackenzie appreciates the people she meets at Second Saturday Workdays. “I just appreciate the community of people that the Land Conservancy tends to encourage you to surround yourself with when you’re experiencing a pandemic—people who are positive and want to get out and do something to impact the space around them.”

Volunteering helps Mackenzie Scott stay grounded
Earlier this year, the Land Conservancy of West Michigan unveiled its first ever Strategic Conservation Plan. The plan identifies three regions where we will focus conservation efforts. In this article, we explore the Lake Michigan Shoreline with LCWM’s Stewardship and Land Protection Directors.

The western border of the Land Conservancy of West Michigan’s service area is the scenic coast of Lake Michigan. This special stretch of land is home to an astounding variety of ecosystems—from the sandy lakeshore, to the towering coastal dunes, to the shaded back dune forests. Migrating birds and insects flock to these areas to rest on their annual journeys. Fox, deer and bobcats amble through the forests. And plants you’ll scarcely find anywhere else thrive in this unique region.

These ecological treasures are globally rare, and climate change, development and the onset of invasive species threaten their long-term survival. Fortunately, there are things we can do to stem the tide.

“One of the strongest ways to create resilient ecosystems is to make sure habitat patches are connected to each other,” said LCWM Stewardship Director Justin Heslinga. That is why preserving habitat connectivity is one of the driving forces behind our Strategic Conservation Plan—our guide for how we will proactively approach the conservation of West Michigan’s natural lands for the next 10-15 years.

“Animals and plants move over time, and if they aren’t boxed in by human development, they are able to shift to environments that better sustain them,” said LCWM Land Protection Director April Scholtz.

“If a disease or disturbance wipes out a species in one patch, others can move into a nearby location, preserving regional biodiversity,” Justin said. It isn’t easy to sum up why biodiversity—or the variety of life in a given ecosystem—is important. But it is integral to the health of an ecosystem. For example, when an invasive plant species prevents native plants from thriving, the animals who depend on those native plants for food are likewise impacted. This creates a cascading effect that not only harms the health of the entire ecosystem, but the quality of our water, air and ultimately our own health. Because of the unique diversity of habitats on the Lake Michigan Shoreline, connected natural land in this region is especially important to protect. But this work isn’t easy.

“A big challenge with creating habitat corridors on the lakeshore is that much of the remaining land is either already developed or very expensive,” Justin said. “But with engaged landowners and strong community partners, we have been able to help string together thousands of acres of protected habitat.”

“A prime example of this is our work with Ottawa County Parks, assisting them in the creation of the North Ottawa Dunes and, more recently, Ottawa Sands County Park,” April said. “Both projects required a strong partnership in order to succeed.”

For North Ottawa Dunes in 2005, Land Conservancy staff worked with the County and a group of local citizens who were committed to raising the private funds required to match a grant. In 2018, staff of the two organizations played off each other’s strengths and were able protect Ottawa Sands. Together, the projects created a stretch of public, permanently protected natural land on the lakeshore.

“Now there are more than 2,000 acres of connected dune, shoreline, river and lake habitats, that also provide a 6-mile recreational corridor,” April said.

Another way to create connected habitat is by expanding existing natural areas, as we hope to do at Flower Creek Dunes Nature Preserve in Montague. With community support, we are in the process of acquiring a 43-acre property adjacent to the preserve, land currently owned by Doug and Gretchen Paprocki.

“It was Doug and his late wife Gretchen who first introduced us to this remarkable area on the lakeshore—a hidden gem, with undeveloped stretches of shoreline and rugged dune forests,” April said. “They were one of the first families to work with the Land Conservancy after the office was opened in Grand Rapids in 1993, and our work with them led us to work with Muskegon County to double the size of the adjacent Meinert County Park and later establish our own preserve nearby on the lakeshore.”

Now, the sale of the Paprocki’s property to the Land Conservancy will further expand the protected Lake Michigan Shoreline in the Montague area.

“The addition of the Paprocki property to Flower Creek Dunes Nature Preserve will help protect a 255-acre corridor of natural land that stretches from Meinert Park to the mouth of Big Flower Creek,” Justin said.

The Paprocki property consists of hilly dunes forested with Eastern hemlock, red oak, maple and more. Birds like pileated woodpecker, vireo and Ameri- can redstart soar in the overstory, while red fox and white-tailed deer roam the understory. In the fall, an incredible variety of mushrooms can be found fruiting on the forest floor.

“What is most exciting to me is the property’s extreme topography and dense, mature forest, which lends a truly wild character to the land that is increasingly hard to find in West Michigan,” Justin said.

The Paprockis have been incredible stewards of the forest during their ownership, and Doug now hopes to pass that torch to the Land Conservancy so that it will remain thoughtfully protected and cared for in perpetuity.

“The Paprocki’s’ years of researching and documenting the natural and cultural history of this area, and their stewardship of the land will be of tremendous benefit to the Flower Creek Dunes Preserve, and to those who will enjoy exploring the dunes,” April said.

Image on right: Land Protection Director April Scholtz stands before a tall forested dune on the Paprocki property.

Learn More
Learn more about the Strategic Conservation Plan at naturenearby.org/strategic-conservation-plan
In it for the long haul

HOW THREE LCWM CONSERVATION EASEMENT OWNERS ARE PROACTIVELY CARING FOR THEIR LAND

The Land Conservancy of West Michigan works with many property owners to help protect privately owned natural land. Through conservation easements, we are able to ensure West Michigan forests, habitat corridors, and wetlands remain connected and undeveloped. The process can be long and is not always easy. But for Land Conservancy conservation easement holders, it’s a labor of love—one that doesn’t stop when the property is protected. Ensuring the continued health of nature’s lands takes proactive work. Earlier this fall, we spoke to three landowners who are working with experts to manage their land to be healthy and resilient.

Elisa Rasmussen and her late husband Richard initially decided to pursue placing a conservation easement on their land because they wanted to ensure the forest surrounding their cabin was not lost to divergent family interests. The 22-acre Lake County property is located close to M-37 and on the Little South Branch of the Pere Marquette River, a very popular fishing destination. In the wrong hands, it would risk being subdivided and developed.

“We thought, who is going to make sure that the land doesn’t get subdivided and that the trees close to the river don’t get cut, so that we don’t affect the temperature of the water,” Elisa said. “There has to be something to protect the forest and the animals that live there.”

The couple worked with the Land Conservancy to ensure the permanent protection of their stretch of wild river and the magnificent oaks and towering white pines that surround it. Richard became interested in the health of the forest and began experimenting with thinning out small trees that were overcrowding the forest.

“He bought himself a pair of loppers that he called ‘Freddy,’ and he went with Freddy cutting down seedlings,” Elisa said.

The couple watched the way those small changes allowed for the oaks to produce more acorns, attracting more wildlife for them to watch from their cabin.

In 2012, the Rasmussens decided to work with a consulting forester to establish a plan to support a healthy and productive forest. With the forester’s help, Elisa and her husband established some goals for their land.

“Just as soon as we had an opportunity with the Land Conservancy to get into their program, that’s exactly what we did. We just couldn’t envision taking advantage of the land,” Manuel said.

The Buszows completed the conservation easement in 2005. Restoring the land had always been a plan, but busy work schedules kept them from actually working on it.

Now that he’s retired, Manuel has been able to start digging into the project.

The Land Conservancy helped the Buszows understand what the land was like before it was a Christmas tree farm.

“One of the things we found out, that back many years ago it used to be an oak savanna area, which is exactly what we have north of us,” Manuel said. “That’s what the Land Conservancy encouraged us to do with the land.”

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Characteristic of such habitats, lupine

“Jason Darling (the forester) came and did a survey, walked and sketched the whole property out, characterized it by water, wetlands, tree constituencies, and the kinds of trees,” Paul said. “After that, Jason took his materials back and he worked up a 120-page document describing all these areas, what his suggestions would be and the timeline.”

The actions will take place over many years and include hunting to reduce deer populations, removing invasive species like autumn olive and oriental bittersweet, noncommercial tree thinning and encouraging the growth of trees like swamp white oak, sugar maple, beech and cherry.

The plan will be reviewed and approved by the state, resulting in a property tax reduction. Then the Busmans can get to work.

“It’s exciting. (Jason) really showed me better ways to control the invasives, which is really important to me,” Paul said.

Working with Jason and the Land Conservancy of West Michigan has helped shaped Paul’s understanding of how to care for his land. He knows the work is an active, life-long endeavor.

“The forest isn’t static,” Paul said. He acknowledged that climate change will likely have an impact on his woods.

“How can we best practice and manage, to not necessarily keep it the same, but to achieve the objective of a diverse, productive woodland? I think this is my best way of accomplishing that.”

In 2012, the Rasmussens decided to work with a consulting forester to establish a plan to support a healthy and productive forest. With the forester’s help, Elisa and her husband established some goals for their land.

“I’m reading here, in my husband’s handwriting, the goals: Forest health, sustainability of the ecosystem, a legacy, diversity of flora and fauna, fire suppression, recreation, exercise and firewood for the cabin,” Elisa said.

Life happened, and the plans were paused for a while. Richard fell ill with ALS, and his treatment became their sole focus. He passed away in 2015.

Now, Elisa is working with Conservation Easement Stewardship Specialist Nick Sanchez to get the ball rolling again. She hopes her sons will help pursue the goals she and her husband set and become the next stewards of the forest.

When Manuel Buszow and his wife bought their forested Muskegon County property, they found their friends had other ideas about what they should do to it.

“We had some people mention that, ‘Wow, you bought 60 acres. You guys could make a ton of money, you could subdivide that,’” Manuel said. “That was the last thing we wanted to hear.”

Though it was in rough shape, the couple valued the natural character of the landscape and couldn’t imagine splitting it up to sell for a profit.

The Buszows learned about the Land Conservancy of West Michigan and conservation easements when they attended a presentation at the White Lake Library.

“Just as soon as we had an opportunity with the Land Conservancy to get into

The forest on the property has become overcrowded and there are some invasive species that need to be removed.

On the recommendation of Land Conservancy staff, Paul connected with a consulting forester to develop a staged forest stewardship plan, a fuller picture of the long-term risks and ecological opportunities for the land.

“Jason Darling (the forester) came and did a survey, walked and sketched the whole property out, characterized it by water, wetlands, tree constituencies, density and those kinds of things,” Paul said. “After that, Jason took his materials back and he worked up a 120-page document describing all these areas, what his suggestions would be and the timeline.”

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Image on right: A coral hairstreak butterfly perches on butterfly weed on Manuel Buszow’s conservation easement property.
Priscilla Nyamai is a Natural Resources Management professor at Grand Valley State University and a former LCWM board member. She writes about her experience conducting a long-term study to assess ways to restore biodiversity and support the resilience of oak forest systems at the B.D. White and Brower Lake Nature Preserves.

**By Priscilla Nyamai**

Climate change is impacting ecological systems, including forests, in a variety of ways—the majority of which are negative. Depending on the ecosystem type and management goals, resource managers can adopt a variety of management approaches to prepare for and address these impacts. Such approaches may include helping the ecosystem resist change, or helping the ecosystem adapt to change—a concept known as resilience. Promoting ecosystem resilience is usually more desirable, because the cumulative effects of climate change impacts are likely to eventually be too much for the system and it may collapse. Additionally, natural systems change and efforts to make them static have proved to fail time and again.

Ecosystem resilience is the ability of an ecosystem to go through a severe disturbance but still maintain or recover its structure and function. Key to promoting ecosystem resilience is encouraging biodiversity, ensuring that there exists a significant variety of species in the ecosystem. By having a high diversity of species in the ecosystem, you are helping the ecosystem by maximizing the adaptive abilities of those species, maximizing the different functions those species perform in the ecosystem (functional redundancy), as well as buffering the ecosystem from total loss of species due to disturbances, since some are likely to survive.

**Hope for resilience at two nature preserves**

**B.D. White Nature Preserve** is a 45-acre natural area in Lowell, MI. The preserve supports a mix of forest and wetland communities. Both preserves historically housed a mix of oak savanna and oak forest that were characterized by a diverse set of trees, grasses and wildflowers. Due to many years of change to the natural fire cycles that maintained these forests, coupled with intensive land use activities including agriculture and clearcutting, these communities have changed significantly. Among the changes are increased tree density and a decreased abundance and diversity of grasses and wildflowers, which makes these systems less diverse, less healthy, and thus more susceptible to the impacts of climate change. Fortunately, there are small pockets with plant species that are typically found only in high quality oak savannas, suggesting that there are opportunities to restore some characteristics of natural oak savanna communities within these forests. These opportunities are a big part of the fuel behind my research in these preserves. My hope is that we can help restore some of the structural and composition-al characteristics that would allow these systems to be more resilient over time.

**Testing ways to restore biodiversity**

My research at the two nature preserves focuses on restoring understory native species diversity. We do this by implementing prescribed fires and “girdling” some mature trees, then conducting experimental studies to examine how the ecosystem responds to these restoration treatments.

Low intensity surface fire helps the system in many ways, including reducing leaf litter on the ground surface to leave exposed mineral soils, releasing nutrients into the soil, and reducing competing vegetation including invasive plants. All these fire effects create conditions that facilitate better regeneration of a diversity of wildflowers and grasses, as well as a diversity of habitat conditions for wildlife and other organisms.

Girdling refers to cutting through the vascular tissue in the trunks of trees with the intention of killing them and letting them remain as standing dead trees, known as snags. This treatment reduces the cover of trees in the canopy to allow more light penetration into the understory, which the wildflowers and grasses need for germination and establishment. The snags also provide habitat for birds such as woodpeckers that are cavity nesters, a primary reason for not simply cutting the trees down. The treatments are implemented every two years, with data collected in the years in between.

We have established 60 experimental plots in each preserve that we use to collect data on variables including vegetation diversity, canopy characteristics, soil nutrients, ground surface conditions. The hope is that the restoration treatments will create conditions that allow understory plant species to regenerate and increase in both abundance and diversity, even as we continue to look for additional ways to enhance the resilience of these ecosystems.

I am grateful to the Land Conservancy of West Michigan for the opportunity to conduct these studies at the two nature preserves. Stewardship Director Justin Heslinga has been a critical partner in all this and other research projects, providing much needed support from the initiation of the projects to implementation of the various restoration treatments. I hope that the findings of these studies will provide direct feedback and lessons that can inform management activities in these and other preserves.

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GVSU professor studies ways to support forest resilience

**AT TWO LCWM NATURE PRESERVES**

Priscilla Nyamai

A student sets up a sampling quadrant. Image courtesy Priscilla Nyamai

"Key to promoting ecosystem resilience is encouraging biodiversity, ensuring that there exists a significant variety of species in the ecosystem." —Priscilla Nyamai


Land Conservancy of West Michigan Fall 2020

naturenearby.org
Margaret Idema first heard about the Land Conservancy of West Michigan when one of her friends, John Will, was helping to create it with just a few other people.

“I remember being intrigued by it,” she said.

A lifelong lover of nature, Margaret has long been involved with the local chapter of the Sierra Club and the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. Years after first hearing of the Land Conservancy, a friend of hers on the board asked Margaret to join, and she didn’t hesitate.

“It was a natural fit for me,” she said.

Margaret served on the Land Conservancy board for six years and remembers it fondly. She appreciated that the role included opportunities to do hands-on work, recalling hauling lumber along trails at Flower Creek Dunes Nature Preserve to help build stairs.

“I like that about the Land Conservancy board. It’s not just about making strategic decisions, it’s ‘Let’s get out there,’” Margaret said.

Margaret’s adventurous spirit stems back to her childhood. Her parents instilled in her what would become a life-long love for the outdoors. Climbing trees, bathing in the river, “Without electricity, we were outdoors most of the time. Climbing trees, bathing in the river,” Margaret said. “As primitive as it was, I really didn’t realize how that was different than anything else. We were just having a ball. We spent a lot of time up there.”

As an adult, Margaret sought out adventure by travelling the world. She’s hiked in Bhutan, Patagonia and Machu Picchu. Every year she goes to Colorado to enjoy the outdoors.

“Without electricity, we were outdoors most of the time. Climbing trees, bathing in the river,” Margaret said. “As primitive as it was, I really didn’t realize how that was different than anything else. We were just having a ball. We spent a lot of time up there.”

“I’m outside probably more intensely than if we weren’t in a pandemic, just so I can breathe. Just breathing fresh air to me is a stress reducer.”

-Margaret Idema

“When I want to do something as a vacation, I guess I choose the more adventurous, outdoors kind of opportunities,” Margaret said.

When at home, Margaret strives to get outside every day with a brisk four-mile walk, usually at Cascade Peace Park in Ada, one of the Land Conservancy’s former community conservation projects. During the pandemic, this activity has taken on a new meaning.

“It’s become more critical, more of a priority of how I spend my days,” Margaret said. “I’m outside probably more intensely than if we weren’t in a pandemic, just so I can breathe. Just breathing fresh air to me is a stress reducer.”

Margaret said it was fortuitous that the pandemic started as spring was returning to Michigan. The mild weather made it easier to deal with the limitations imposed by the stay-at-home order.

“I’m concerned for myself and others what the coming winter will be like, having to be more housebound,” she said. “I will probably make a priority of going out—instead of waiting for the best day to cross country ski or snowshoe, I’ll probably just go anyway, because of the importance of getting outside.”

Margaret’s close connection to the natural world fuels her support for organizations like the Land Conservancy. She is troubled by urban expansion and the development of natural lands—both on a national and local level.

“That’s part of why the Land Conservancy is important. To set aside these lands so that the big developers with a lot of money don’t come by and just buy it all up,” she said.

We are grateful for Margaret’s passionate support as a donor and volunteer.

Upcoming Volunteer Opportunities

**Second Saturday Workday - Prairie Seed Collecting**
Saturday, November 14, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. | Saul Lake Bog Nature Preserve

**Black Friday Prairie Planting**
Friday, November 27, 10 a.m.-12 p.m. | Saul Lake Bog Nature Preserve

**Second Saturday Workday - Native Grass, Wildflower & Tree Planting**
Saturday, December 5*, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. | The Highlands

**Second Saturday Workday - Glossy Buckthorn Removal**
Saturday, January 9, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. | Lamberton Lake Fen Nature Preserve

**Second Saturday Workday - Glossy Buckthorn Removal**
Saturday, February 13, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. | Lamberton Lake Fen Nature Preserve

*Please note: The December Second Saturday Workday will actually take place on the first Saturday of the month.

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Sign up to receive the latest about Land Conservancy projects, events and more when you subscribe to our monthly e-newsletter! Receive quarterly news about volunteer opportunities when you subscribe to our Volunteer E-news. Scroll to the bottom of our home page to sign up for both online at naturenearby.org.

Margaret Idema

Fall 2020
OUR MISSION

Helping people protect, enjoy and care for natural land in West Michigan

$45,000 Matching Gift Challenge

Don’t forget, the J.A. Woollam Foundation has pledged to match all gifts over $500, or any increase to your annual gift, up to $30,000. The Hansen Charitable Foundation has also pledged to match renewal gifts up to $15,000. Maximize your impact—make a gift today!