



## Waukesha County Citizens Protecting Waukesha County's Remaining Natural Areas

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### RARE OWL VISITS CONSERVANCY SITE

Owls that normally live in the boreal forest around the top of the world have been driven south by a crash in the population of rodents, in particular the red-backed and meadow voles. Vole populations fluctuate with weather conditions. The vole population in the fall of 2004 was the lowest since 1992. Voles are the preferred food of the great gray owl and the northern hawk owl. An article in the Science section of the *New York Times* on March 8th reports that this winter more than 2000 great gray owls have been spotted south of the Canadian border in the United States, along with 200 hawk owls and 300 boreal owls. In a typical winter, there might be 35 great gray owls, 6 northern hawk owls and 1 boreal owl.

The amazing photograph of a northern hawk owl (*Surnia ulula*) seen on this page was taken at land owned by the Waukesha County Land Conservancy. Wildlife photographer and Conservancy member, Ralph Curtis, captured this image early in the morning of March 4th at the Ottawa Wildlife Refuge.

The northern hawk owl is one of the only owls that hunts during daylight. Males and females look alike, although, as with most birds of prey, the female is often larger than the male. Males range from about 14 to 16 inches, while females can be 15 to 18 inches, which makes them a medium sized owl. Northern hawk owls' identifying characteristics include yellow eyes and a yellow bill on a grayish-white facial disc, bordered with a heavy black stripe. Their long tail and short, pointed wings make them very maneuverable and fast, with the ability to fly low and fast in a woods, like a Cooper's hawk.

The *New York Times* article reported that these owls were moving into northern Wisconsin. According to Dr. Noel Cutright, past president of the Wisconsin Society

for Ornithology, one of these visiting owls may come to southern Wisconsin every five to seven years. "It is exceedingly rare," he said. There is a well-documented northern hawk owl hunting in Harrington Beach State Park in northern Ozaukee County this winter. Dr. Cutright said that it has been photographed by over 1000 people.

When asked how he managed to get this great photograph, Ralph Curtis said, "I go to the Ottawa Wildlife Refuge at least once a week, sometimes more, just to walk or take wildlife photos. The morning of the northern hawk owl sighting, I went out before light in the morning and set

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Northern Hawk Owl photographed at Ottawa Wildlife Refuge by Ralph Curtis on March 4, 2005

## Rare Owl Visits Conservancy Site

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up my tripod on the edge of the fields on the west side of the property, near the large area of canary grass. I was hoping to catch a deer on the way to bedding down for the day or possibly a turkey coming to the fields in the morning.

"I did not see much activity, so around 8:00 AM I decided to walk and do some birding. I wasn't 100 yards from where I sat all morning, when I saw the 'clump' in a tree that looked like it just didn't belong. Creeping slowly towards it, I recognized the unmistakable silhouette of a northern hawk owl. It took me a long time to make my way around the bird, to where the sun was at my back. Finally, able to set up the tripod, I was amused at how patient this bird was toward me. 'He' was quite the showman, and didn't seem to mind me being there at all." Using a Canon digital camera, Curtis captured the owl at about 20 yards with a 400 mm lens.

Biologist Marlin Johnson, who is keeping lists of the diversity of species on Waukesha County Land Conservancy properties, was excited to hear about this northern hawk owl at Ottawa Wildlife Refuge. You can help Johnson by bringing your binoculars and camera when you go for a walk on properties owned by the Waukesha County Land Conservancy. Be sure to call him (965-2227) to report your interesting discoveries.



Susan Borkin's presentation at the Annual Meeting described the problems facing the Powesheik Skipperling (*Oarisma powesheik*), one of Wisconsin's endangered butterflies.



A woods in the City of Waukesha that may be donated to the Waukesha County Land Conservancy

## ANNUAL MEETING HELD AT RED CIRCLE INN

The annual membership meeting of the Waukesha County Land Conservancy was held on March 9, 2005 at the Red Circle Inn in Nashotah. Eighty members of the Conservancy attended to enjoy a delicious dinner, to elect the board of directors for the next year and to hear Susan Borkin, Director of the Puelicher Butterfly Hall at the Milwaukee Public Museum, speak about *The Endangered Butterflies of Waukesha County*. Borkin's slides of the Powesheik Skipperling (*Oarisma powesheik*) told the fascinating story of the life cycle of this rare insect. Members were astounded to learn that the tiny caterpillar of this butterfly actually lives through the winter hanging on to a grass or sedge, buried beneath the snow. It is a mystery why it does not freeze solid and die. Measuring only an inch across, the adult Powesheik's wings are mostly brown, with an orange edge on the forewing. As the Powesheik is found only in northern prairies, it is vital for preservation of this species that sites like the Eagle Centre Prairie be preserved.

### The Conservancy Joins the 21st Century

Also introduced at this year's annual meeting was the Conservancy's new power point show. Several versions of this show were created by board member Neal O'Reilly. They tell the story of what the Waukesha County Land Conservancy has accomplished since it formed in 1992. If your organization needs a program, O'Reilly or another member of the Conservancy can bring this informative and colorful presentation to your group.



Kris Jensen working at Nelson's Woods



An ephemeral pond in Tamarack Swamp Preserve

## **Video Showing: "The Pristine Mukwonago River"**

**April 26, 2005 at 7:00 PM**

**Mukwonago United Church of Christ**

Presented by Nancy Gloe, Co-Director of the Friends of the Mukwonago River. Gloe, in conjunction with the Waukesha County Land Conservancy, used a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to create a video that showcases the outstanding features of this river.

Directions to the church: In Mukwonago, go west on CTH NN about one mile from Hwy 83. After the second stoplight, the church is the second church on the right.

**THE MUKWONAGO RIVER.** From its spring pond headwaters, through its 14-mile course, to its confluence with the Fox River, the Mukwonago River is the highest quality waterway in Southeast Wisconsin. The state of Wisconsin classifies this stream as an "exceptional resource watercourse." This classification reflects the importance of the river to Wisconsin, particularly to the southeast region where this unique resource is without compare.

Beneath its crystal clear waters, the stream harbors an astounding array of life. While most 14-mile rivers may contain 15 or 20 species of fish, recent fish surveys have identified as many as 56 species of fish in the Mukwonago River including several that are threatened or endangered. The river is also home to a significant diversity of insects, plants and animals including some unusual aquatic species such as fresh water sponges. Many of these fish, plants and insects are dependent upon the river's clean, clear water. The Mukwonago River's gravel shoals are home to one of the most significant fresh water mussel populations in the State, again, several of which are threatened or endangered.

Much of the headwaters of the river and the land that surrounds it, including the Lulu Lake State Natural Area, are now protected through ownership by the Nature Conservancy and the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources. However, much remains to be done if this valuable natural resource is to be preserved. The purpose of the video is to educate the public on the river's importance and to promote conservation efforts.