GROUNDSWELL CONSERVANCY

Conservation where you live
SUMMER/FALL 2026

Groundswell Makes History With Largest-Ever Land Protection Project

Partnership With Ducks Unlimited Protects 2,000 Acres Along Lower Sugar River

Logan Killam | Vyberant

By Tony Abate, Senior Director of Conservation

Good news! Groundswell Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited permanently protected nearly 2,000 acres along the Lower Sugar River in Rock County. This marks the largest land protection project in Groundswell's 43-year history.

A two-mile stretch of the Sugar River frontage curves along the property, featuring a sweeping landscape of wetlands, floodplain forests, prairies, and other habitats. This land will help support wildlife, provide countless recreational opportunities, and protect one of southern Wisconsin's largest remaining floodplain landscapes.

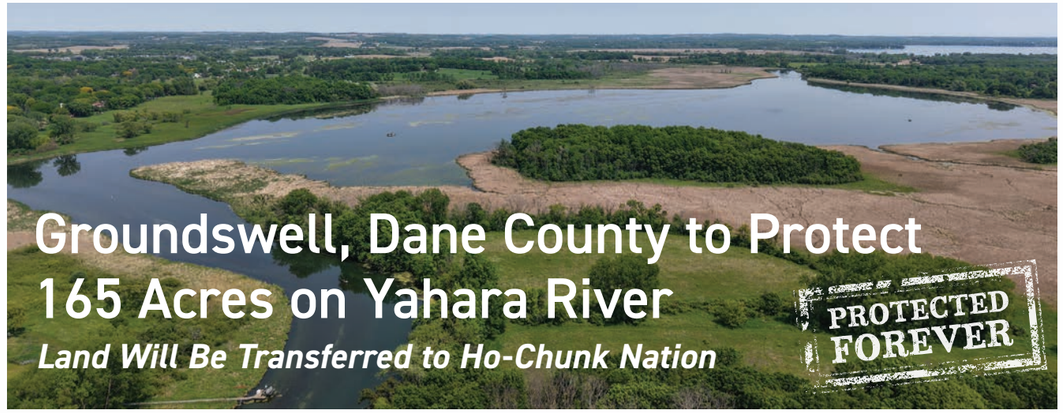
"Acquiring this property is a huge win for wildlife and outdoor recreation," said Jason Cotter, a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife biologist who manages the Avon Bottoms Wildlife Area. "This achievement was only possible because of strong partnerships and a shared commitment to protecting these natural resources."

The land is expected to be transferred to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The property will be managed as part of the Avon Bottoms Wildlife Area, marking Groundswell's fourth land protection project in connection with this natural area.

This landmark project was made possible thanks to the following:

Continued on page 2

The land purchased features restored wet prairie along with wooded areas and historic oxbow meanders—the curved remnants of an old river channel.



The Herro property is a true crown jewel within the Lower Mud Lake Natural Resource Area. Ben Jones

An extraordinary land protection project along the Yahara River is capturing attention across Wisconsin.

PBS Wisconsin, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, *The Capital Times*, and WORT Community Radio have all highlighted Groundswell Conservancy and Dane County's effort to protect 165 acres in the Town of Dunn, and return this culturally important ancestral land to the stewardship of the Ho-Chunk Nation.

The Herro property is a rare landscape. Its wetlands, tallgrass prairies, oak woodlands, and mile of shoreline along the Yahara River and Lower Mud Lake provide important wildlife habitat and help protect water quality.

The land also features burial mounds and historic village sites reflecting generations of Ho-Chunk history.

Groundswell has worked for more than a decade alongside the Herro family, Dane County, and the Ho-Chunk Nation to bring this vision closer to reality. In May, the Dane County Board approved funding to acquire the property. Groundswell will join Dane County in holding a permanent conservation easement to protect it forever.

We're grateful to see this remarkable collaboration resonate across Wisconsin. We'll keep you updated as this important project moves forward. ■

Groundswell Makes History with Largest-Ever Land Protection Project

(Continued from page 1)

- a Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program grant administered by the Wisconsin DNR
- a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- generous private donors, including two anonymous donors, Willi Van Haren, and Cate & John Harrington
- support from conservation partners, including the National Wild Turkey Federation and Pheasants Forever

Before funding for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program expired on June 30, Groundswell helped secure a Knowles-Nelson grant. Without that grant, this land purchase would not have been possible. This project is a powerful reminder that the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program is an investment in conservation, recreation, and our future. (Read more about the program on Page 6.)

Together, we've worked to permanently protect 2,600 acres of wetlands, stream corridors, and more in this region. Thanks to this work, we can enjoy cleaner water, healthier wetlands, and a larger wildlife corridor that benefits both people and nature for generations to come. ■

Blazing New Trails at Westport Prairie

A new trails and signage plan will make Westport Prairie easier to navigate and enjoy. Ben Jones

By Sam Douglass, Farm & Land Manager

Over the past decade, Westport Prairie has expanded tremendously. An entire valley that was previously farmed is now cloaked in restored prairie. Many of the trails, though beautiful and well-maintained, are just the legacy of old farming paths. They weren't built to shed water well or give hikers an easy loop. We want to change that.

We've hired Tim Malzhan, a local trail builder with 25 years of experience, and the former Director of Trail Operations at Ice Age Trail Alliance. Over the past year, Tim has walked the trails in every season and all kinds of weather, observing the conditions as they change. In this process, Groundswell staff have walked the trails with Tim, working through issues one slope at a time. Sometimes, a small reroute can prevent an accessibility or erosion issue. This fall, we'll have a new comprehensive trails and signage plan for the property. Then, we'll get to work building permanent, truly sustainable trails.

We're so grateful to Bill O'Connor and Krista Roys, friends and supporters of Groundswell, for funding this work.

It's not too late to weigh in. If you love the trails at Westport Prairie and have suggestions for us, please reach out to sam@groundswellconservancy.org. I'd love your input as we make permanent changes to our beloved preserve. ■

Mario Quintana

Help Us Gather Seeds at Westport Prairie

Each fall, Groundswell hosts seed collection days at Westport Prairie, and we need your help again! Join us on one or more of the following days to collect seed as we convert more agricultural land to prairie:

Tuesday, September 8, 4-6 p.m.
Tuesday, September 22, 4-6 p.m.
Wednesday, September 30, 9-11 a.m.
Wednesday, October 14, 9-11 a.m.
Thursday, October 15, 4-6 p.m.
Thursday, October 29, 4-6 p.m.

We'll provide clipping tools and gloves; just bring yourself and a friend! Sign up for our outdoor volunteering email list and RSVP for each event. Visit groundswellconservancy.org/events to learn more.

Thank you for sharing your time to expand our grasslands at this special place so more birds and other wildlife can thrive!

Jennifer Krzak at the western terminus of the Ice Age Trail located at Interstate State Park, marking the end of her journey. Jim Krzak

An Ice Age Adventure

By Catie Stumpf, Communications Coordinator

Jennifer Krzak has big ambitions. Over the course of 13 months in 2025 and 2026, Groundswell Conservancy's Administrative Assistant ran the entire Wisconsin Ice Age Trail! This national scenic trail spans 1,200 miles across the state—traversing steep, rocky terrain; rolling prairies; dense woodlands; wetlands; and waterways.

Her journey was no easy feat: It took 22 separate trips, 77 non-consecutive days, 76,000 feet of elevation gain and loss, and endless miles traveling to and from trail segments with her husband, Jim. Along the way, Jen navigated hilly terrain, wetland crossings, and unpredictable weather—and brought home a few battle scars as keepsakes.

But the Ice Age Trail also brought memorable moments in nature, from sightings of porcupines and black bears to discovering small Wisconsin towns along the way.

"We stopped often to listen to complete silence and take in the beauty of it all," Jen said. "My journey on the Ice Age Trail helped me be more comfortable as a trail runner."

No matter what path she takes, Jen's ambition is an inspiration to all of us at Groundswell. Congratulations, Jen, on an incredible accomplishment! ■

GIS Volunteer Wanted

Do you have GIS skills and want to put them to work for local conservation? Groundswell Conservancy is looking for a volunteer to help with mapping and other GIS projects.

The GIS volunteer will work with Groundswell staff to map land protection projects, as well as help staff use mapping to better communicate our conservation work.

We're looking for someone with experience using ArcGIS Pro, strong attention to detail, and an interest in protecting special places in south-central Wisconsin.

The time commitment is approximately four hours per week, with scheduling flexibility.

Interested or know someone who might be a good fit? Email Tony Abate, Senior Director of Conservation, at tony@groundswellconservancy.org to learn more.

A Big Welcome to Our New Board Members

Board members Karen Anderson (left) and Bill Quackenbush (right, pictured with Executive Director Heidi Habeger)

By Heidi Habeger, Executive Director

On July 1, Groundswell welcomed two new faces to our Board of Directors: Bill Quackenbush and Karen Anderson!

Karen is a Director of Development for the Wisconsin Foundation & Alumni Association. She's a local graduate of UW–Madison's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and Edgewood College's Social Innovation and Sustainability Fellowship. Since growing up in the Black Earth Creek watershed, she has worked in restoration with state and tribal governments, and nonprofits organizations throughout Wisconsin. We're so grateful to welcome Karen's expertise in conservation and fundraising to our board.

Bill recently retired after more than two decades as the Ho-Chunk Nation's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. He's also led a field trip on one of our protected properties, sharing Ho-Chunk history, culture, and the significance of the landscape. His knowledge and perspective will be valuable additions to our work.

Join us in welcoming Karen and Bill! ■

Lifting Hearts Therapy Garden Celebrates Sixth Year

By Yimmuaj Yang, Community Director

The Lifting Hearts Therapy Garden is wrapping up its sixth year with Groundswell Conservancy! First piloted in 2021 as an alternative healing space for HMoob elders at the Southeast Asian Healing Center, this 20-week program runs from May through September. The garden has truly become a haven. We were so excited to welcome back nine beloved elders to their "happy place" this season!

Special thanks to Nancy Heiden, and Sue Goldwomon & Arlene Zaucha for making this program possible. We're thrilled to have partnered for another beautiful season of growth, healing, and community! ■

This year's Lifting Hearts Therapy Garden crops included cucumbers, melons, rice, and more. Ben Lam

Amanda Dambrink

Chris Gavin of Eagle Outdoor Skills leads a May field trip for Groundswell at Hickory Hill Conservancy in Cross Plains. Groundswell protected the land with a Knowles-Nelson grant.

State Conservation Funding Has Lapsed. What Comes Next?

By Amy Mertz, Director of Development & Communications

For the first time in nearly four decades, Wisconsin began its fiscal year without funding for the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

The program remains in state law, but its funding expired June 30 after the Legislature did not reauthorize it. Until funding is restored, Knowles-Nelson grants that help communities and land trusts protect land, create trails, and expand public access are on hold.

We remain hopeful that this is a temporary setback—not the end of Knowles-Nelson.

Gathering Waters, Wisconsin's alliance for land trusts, is already working with legislative champions on a proposal to restore funding in 2027, and Groundswell has provided input toward that effort. We'll continue talking directly with legislators and candidates, and inviting them onto the land to see firsthand what's at stake.

At the same time, Groundswell is prepared to keep conservation moving forward.

We began adapting several years ago as Knowles-Nelson funding became less predictable. We've strengthened partnerships with Dane County and local communities such as the towns of Dunn and Dunkirk. We've also tapped into federal funding for wetland and farmland protection. We'll continue to explore every available option, including private support when appropriate, to protect important places.

The loss of Knowles-Nelson funding may mean some opportunities are harder to pursue. Our job is to focus our resources on the most significant projects and keep moving forward while we work toward the program's return.

The next several months matter. The Legislature elected this November will have an opportunity to restore Knowles-Nelson funding, and conversations that shape the next state budget will begin early. Ask candidates where they stand on Knowles-Nelson and whether they will support restoring funding for the program. Building those relationships now can help make conservation a priority when the new Legislature convenes in January. ■

Mario Quintana

From left to right: BJ Byers, Land Management Director; crew members Cody Bunch, Breyden Noble, Taryn Endres, Eliza Volz, and Emily Udomtanapon; and Sam Douglass, Farm & Land Manager

A Summer of Learning, Stewardship, and Connection With the Land

By BJ Byers, Land Management Director

As the summer comes to a close, the 2026 Prairie Partners crew wrapped up another season of hard work restoring our special places!

From late May to early August, this year's interns helped care for a variety of natural areas, rotating between Groundswell Conservancy and our partner organizations: Riverland Conservancy, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and Ice Age Trail Alliance.

Every Wednesday, the crew helped Groundswell staff care for Westport Prairie and Patrick Marsh by clearing invasive species and restoring native habitats—all while learning about prairie restoration along the way.

This year's crew members were Cody Bunch, Breyden Noble, Taryn Endres, Eliza Volz, and Emily Udomtanapon.

We're proud of this team's dedication to caring for the land. Their restoration efforts protect wildlife habitat, improve water quality, and help our special places thrive.

We're especially thankful for the sponsors who made this program possible. Thank you to Mary Binkley & Dennis Petzke, Nancy & Lou Bruch, Wes Carter, Doug & Sherry Caves, Nancy Heiden, Susan & Les Hoffman, Susan & Conrad Jostad, Jim & Rumi O'Brien, Cary & Scott Reich, Mark Smith & Dan Rigney, and Susan & Rolf Wulfsberg. Additional thanks go to Mary & Doug Marshall for sponsoring the picnic with this year's crew. ■

A Lasting Gift for a Greener Future

Would you like to make a difference for the lands and waters you love for generations to come—beyond what may be possible for you today? Including Groundswell Conservancy in your estate plans is a meaningful way to deepen your commitment to protecting special places forever. Your legacy can be one of stewardship, care, and hope for the future.

Contact Amy at amy@groundswellconservancy.org or (608) 258-9797 for more information.

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Mission

We protect special places, forever. We want everyone to live in a world filled with green places where communities thrive. We believe that land is essential for all people's physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. If we don't protect undeveloped land now, it may be lost forever.

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Conservation where you live

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Groundswell Conservancy strives to use equitable language in our written communications. If you have feedback on how we can improve, please email amy@groundswellconservancy.org.

Fun Events to Support Our Mission

We invite you to join us at one or both of these upcoming events! Don't miss this chance to visit some of the places you've helped protect. These events are free and open to the public.

Ben Jones

Field Trip: Cultural Landscape Tour

Thursday October 8, 2026 | 4–6 p.m.

Explore 48 acres of newly protected land near the Yahara River with Groundswell board member and former Ho-Chunk Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Bill Quackenbush! Learn about the historical and cultural significance of this Town of Dunn property owned by Alan and Carol Breed—and protected by Groundswell.

Reserve your spot today at groundswellconservancy.org/events or call us at 608-258-9797.

Thank you to our sponsors

Jamtober Ramble

Saturday, October 17, 2026 | 6:30 p.m.

Groundswell is honored and grateful to be selected as the beneficiary of Music Makes a Difference's Jamtober Ramble on Saturday, October 17, at Atwood Music Hall! The evening will feature Them Coulee Boys, Adam Greuel & the Space Burritos, and Cork 'n Bottle String Band—plus a special appearance by Groundswell staff! Proceeds from this show will support our work to protect special places, forever.

Tickets are $15-$30 in advance, plus fees. Visit groundswellconservancy.org/events for ticket information.