

THE UNDERSTORY

Legacy Land Conservancy

Fall



2025



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LEGACY
Land Conservancy

GREETINGS

This year has not been without its challenges. Like many of you, we've felt the weight of discouraging news from Washington, D.C.—and in June we faced a major setback when our federal \$24.6M Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project award to preserve 4,000 acres of forest and farmland in southeast Michigan was rescinded.

But here's the good news: Legacy is strong. Our staff, board, and partners are resilient, and we didn't stop. We filed an appeal. We continue to stand by our commitment to the Michigan landowners, families, and farmers we planned on helping through this award.



Susan LaCroix, US Representative Debbie Dingell, and Sybil Kolon standing next to the new Iron Creek Preserve kiosk at the opening celebration.

And we lean on each other, our community—and on you—to keep moving forward.

There's a lot to be thankful for, and to celebrate!

This summer we officially opened Iron Creek Preserve to the public. We're on track to close on three more conservation easements in the next six months. And we're in the home stretch of growing something new and exciting in Jackson County!

Even when setbacks are thrown our way, we choose to focus on the positive—and there is plenty of good news to go around. Thank you for standing with us, for helping us protect Michigan's land and water, and for reminding us that together, we are stronger.

Yours in Conservation,

Diana Kern, Executive Director

Matching Gift Opportunity

Double your donation this fall up to \$100,000 thanks to our friends at the **Ardent Spirits Fund** and long-time supporters **Tom and Debby McMullen**. These two families came together to inspire our community to help build a resilient, thriving future of land protection in Southern Michigan.

Every dollar you donate to Legacy Land Conservancy now through January 15, 2026 will be matched by these two generous families, fueling a future of land and water protection. Join Ardent Spirits, the McMullens, and Legacy and double your gift today!



Drawn to the Light: Mothing Illuminates Biodiversity

By Maddy Gackebach, Preserve Stewardship Associate

In the still of the night and under a moonlit sky full of stars shining brightly against the backdrop of Iron Creek Preserve, I looked out over the fen. The enchanting soundtrack of owls hooting and frogs croaking took over my senses as I stood mesmerized by the fireflies dancing around me.



Maddy Gackebach

I had been in this same spot so many times during the last two months. It was the place the stewardship team and I had worked day after day in the blazing hot sun preparing Iron Creek for its opening. Yet, under the cover of darkness, it felt utterly transformed.

Only hours after the opening day festivities ended, David Cappaert, local entomologist and Legacy volunteer, returned to Iron Creek just before sunset to set up his mothing station. It wasn't much. Just a framed white sheet and a mercury vapor light bulb. But according to moth enthusiasts, it's the gold standard. These bulbs emit a wide spectrum of light, including ultraviolet wavelengths that moths can't resist.

A few moths had already gathered on the sheet when I joined the group just after sunset. We quickly got to work noting several different species of the *Haploa* genus, which are frequent visitors early in the night. The first couple of hours were slow, mostly a variety of small moths and insects.

Around 11pm, things picked up—and the larger, showier moths began to appear. First came a small-eyed sphinx. Not long after, a breathtaking lo moth fluttered in—a favorite among moth enthusiasts. Other notable visitors included the elm sphinx, spotted apatelodes, beautiful wood-nymph, and painted lichen moth.

Moths often live in the shadow of butterflies, underappreciated despite their ecological importance. They are incredibly diverse and numerous. Many birds rely on moth caterpillars to raise their young. And surprisingly, many moths are pollinators—filling a critical nighttime niche in ecosystems.

Like butterflies, many moth species depend on specific host plants to complete their life cycles. So knowing which moths inhabit a site can also tell us about the plant life there. For a land conservancy like Legacy, this is valuable knowledge. It helps us make informed stewardship decisions and support the rich biodiversity that thrives on our preserves.



Mothing group at Iron Creek Preserve looks at insects attracted by the mercury vapor light bulb. Photo by Maddy Gackebach

Throughout the night, we recorded our observations on iNaturalist, a platform where you can share sightings, contribute to biodiversity science, and connect with other naturalists. By uploading our findings, we not only get help identifying species, but also contribute to Legacy's growing record of biodiversity across our protected lands.

One personal observation struck me: individuals of the same species often arrived around the same time. Early in the night, several *Haploa* moths landed on the sheet in quick succession. Later, a wave of *Halysidota* moths followed. I'm not sure why this happens, but it's inspired me to learn more about moth behavior and life cycles.

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Iron Creek Preserve Officially Opens!

On a bright summer Saturday morning in June, more than 80 friends, neighbors, and supporters gathered to celebrate the opening of Iron Creek Preserve.

After more than a year of intensive stewardship, infrastructure work, and 270-plus volunteer hours, guests were treated to an opening celebration that included cake, a ribbon cutting ceremony, and guided tours.

U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell (MI-06) gave opening remarks emphasizing the importance of public lands and the value they provide to communities—especially for children to experience nature.

“What you all are doing is what John Dingell spent his life working for and I feel connected to him as I’m here,” widow of former U.S. Representative John Dingell and current U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell said. “We need our young children to be able to appreciate the outdoors, to be able to just run and roam and see nature and find the butterflies and the snakes.”

Land donor Sybil Kolon expressed her appreciation to Legacy for helping make her long-held dream of creating a public nature preserve a reality. She acknowledged the many steps and partnerships involved, and reflected on her personal connection to the land.

“This is a dream come true that began 49 years ago,” Sybil said. “I have always wanted to connect people to nature, and that has been my focus since retiring nine years ago.”



Land owner Sybil Kolon (L) and US Representative Debbie Dingell (R) steady the scissors before cutting the ribbon. Photo by Susan LaCroix



Legacy staff Kyler Moran (L) and Diana Kern (R) stand with land donors Sybil Kolon (L-center) and Maan Abdulbaki (R-center) on the new pedestrian bridge.

After Rep. Dingell and Sybil cut the ribbon, guests joined Legacy staff members for guided tours or explored the preserve on their own.

Folks enjoyed the newly widened one-mile trail system winding along wetlands and wildflower fields, under lush, towering oak and hickory trees, and over rolling hills. Those who joined the guided tours were treated to stories about the prairie fen, Jewell's Folly, and the reconstructed bridge.

It took an extensive amount of work and collaboration to open Iron Creek Preserve. We are so grateful to everyone who had a hand in making it all happen!

We are especially grateful to Sybil and Maan for donating the land, to our preserve and land acquisition teams for their tireless work, to the volunteers who gave their time, and to the donors whose generosity made this day possible.

Iron Creek's story doesn't end with its opening. Our team continues to work in the field and behind the scenes. More signs will be added. Invasive plants will be removed. Restoration projects continue.

The next chapter is just beginning, and you are part of it. Visit the trails, volunteer your time, learn, and enjoy! We look forward to seeing you on the trails and connecting with you at future events.

Stay tuned for upcoming volunteer opportunities and hikes!

www.legacylandconservancy.org/events/



Visitors explore the main trail.
Photo by David Cappaert



Visitor reads signs on the kiosk before heading on to the trail.
Photo by David Cappaert

Special thanks to:

- **Sybil and Maan** for donating their land so the community can enjoy it, *forever*.
- **The staff**—especially our preserve team—who dedicated thousands of hours creating a safe and welcoming space, and our land acquisitions team who spent years navigating this transaction to ensure Sybil and Maan's vision could become reality.
- **Our volunteers** who assisted the preserve team through volunteer workdays.
- **Our donors** whose generosity is vital to sharing this special place now, and always.

Donate to the Iron Creek Preserve Stewardship Fund



Federal Funding Setback Requires Legacy to Pivot

This summer brought tough news for conservation in Michigan. Legacy learned that our \$24.6 million federal Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) 2024 award to preserve 4,000 acres of forest and farmland in southeast Michigan was officially rescinded.

That's not just a number. It represents dozens of families, aging farmers, and landowners who are ready today to preserve the places they love. It means delayed conservation projects, lost opportunities for farm families, and setback for local communities that depend on working lands.

"Not only does it hurt Michigan's economy and our communities," coalition lead and Legacy Land Conservancy Land Protection Director Susan LaCroix said. "It specifically hurts the families and farmers who are relying on this funding to support their way of life."

The award—originally made possible through funding in the 2024 Farm Bill and already appropriated by Congress—would have been an investment in the efforts of small businesses, local governments, farmers and ranchers, and conservation leaders to strengthen local economies and preserve our Michigan way of life for generations.

Although the award had been frozen in early 2025 like so much other federal funding, Legacy was anticipating the chance to negotiate the terms of the agreement. The administration's decision to fully rescind it in June without any negotiation was extremely disappointing.

Most of the award, approximately \$20 million, was to be used directly by the coalition to strategically purchase conservation easements on 4,000 acres of private agricultural and forest lands in a five-county area. These conservation easements on working lands help ensure that the land remains in agricultural production permanently, protecting the region's rich soils from development and preserving the ability to grow food for our communities for generations to come.



Forest in Washtenaw County.



RCPP UPDATE: APPEAL HEARING COMPLETE

After filing an appeal in July with the National Appeals Division requesting a hearing about the USDA's decision to rescind the Southeast Michigan Conservation Coalition 2024 RCPP project award, Legacy participated in a formal appeal hearing on Sept 22.

The earliest the judge could issue a decision is the end of December.



But Legacy has never been one to give up. We believe in being nimble and adaptable, and despite the news, we did what we do best—pivot.

Full of determination and a commitment to the landowners, families, and farmers we planned on helping through this award, our team immediately went to work.

We asked questions of the federal government and sought clarity from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. We consulted with our legal team, board members, and peers.

And after much consideration, we submitted an appeal to the National Appeals Division on July 10, 2025.

The appeal process is intensive. It is time-consuming and relies heavily on the brain power of our staff. Our team has spent an enormous amount of time on top of their normal responsibilities on research, negotiation, legal consultations, the appeal pre-hearing, and communicating with the public.

Our decision to appeal was calculated and purposeful. And it considered the additional costs. We've been judicious with our resources. We've sought out in-kind and pro-bono sources whenever possible.

Thanks to pro bono support from local attorneys as well as Lawyers for Good Government, we've been able to move forward strategically while keeping costs low. A formal hearing occurred on September 22, and it may be several months before a decision is made.

We've learned a lot over the last few months. The process has only strengthened our resolve and commitment: we will keep helping Michigan's families, farmers, and communities who depend on us and our services. No matter the obstacles, Legacy remains focused on protecting the land that sustains us all.



Farmland in Lenawee County.

Legacy staff participated in a formal hearing on September 22.

There is a lot of uncertainty about when the judge will issue a decision.

Head to our website for the most up-to-date information on our appeal.



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As my friend and I prepared to leave, something truly special happened. Near the sheet, we spotted a stunning moth we had both longed to see: the giant leopard moth. Moments later, six more arrived. We joked that they must have called each other: "Hey! Meet at the sheet at midnight!"

After starting my role at Legacy in April and spending two months preparing for Iron Creek for opening, this special nighttime experience felt like a gift. Not only does mothing provide scientific value, it has become one of my favorite ways to connect with nature.

After our magical first night at Iron Creek, more people joined in for another successful mothing adventure at Johnson Preserve in August. Stay tuned for more chances to experience this nighttime window biodiversity with Legacy!

Legacy's preserves are open from dawn until dusk. Visitors are only allowed outside of these hours during Legacy approved events.



Giant leopard moth
Photo by
David Cappaert

LEGACY Land Conservancy

*Protecting and Preserving
Southern Michigan*

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*A special thank you to all
the volunteers who helped us
during a spring or summer
workday!*



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