



News

Forest's family grows

Land trust, recently in charge of maintenance at Meltzer Woods, asks for volunteers of all ages

By Judy C. Sprengelmeyer
Staff writer

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Most people in Shelby County are familiar with Meltzer Woods and its history. Located on County Road 600 East just north of the intersection with State Road 244, the log cabin at the side of the lane hints at the era reflected there.

The 60-acre woods is one of the few remaining old-growth forests that once covered Indiana and later fed a burgeoning furniture industry right here in Shelbyville.

The Central Indiana Land Trust, a conservation organization, is now assisting the Meltzer family in managing the woods in the most sustainable way possible. Its director, Cliff Chapman said "Meltzer Woods is one of the finest examples of old-growth forest remaining in the Midwest. Not only are the trees centuries old, but the quality of the forest itself showcases a high diversity of plants and animals."

Chapman said Tuesday that when he first approached Phil Meltzer about managing and maintaining the woods for the Meltzer family, who continues to own the land, he assured him upfront that "conserving Meltzer Woods is absolutely the No. 1 priority of The Central Indiana Land Trust."

According to the trust's website — www.conservingindiana.org — ecologists define "old-growth forest" as a stand of trees including some more than 150 years old with little disturbance for the past century. At Meltzer Woods, some of the oldest trees are thought to be 300 years old, and while another of the titans of the forest fell in high winds recently, the small acreage has been home to three state-champion trees: a black ash, a swamp white oak and a Schumard's red oak, all of which have measured more than 64 inches in diameter. The red oak fell in high winds back in March, which was devastating.

"I really loved that tree," Chapman said.

Meltzer Woods is a favorite "stomping grounds" of the Central Indiana Land Trust and other conservation and historical associations and are planning a special family day from 3 to 6 p.m. Saturday, giving local residents a chance to observe the towering survivors and enjoy a simple walk in the woods during crisp autumn weather. "We'll have activities for kids, a campfire, music and hikes through the woods," said the trust's community relations director Maria Steiner. Events include:

- n Naturalist-led hikes through the woods.
- n Tours of the Meltzer Farm's old cabins and barns.
- n A hot dog and marshmallow roast with apple cider.
- n Games and activities for kids.

But for the more ambitious, Saturday could be a mini "working vacation" from noon to 3 p.m., when volunteers will be on the hunt for the purple wintercreeper, which sounds like some frightful creature left over from Halloween but is a woody-stemmed, broadleaf evergreen, also known as Euonymous fortunei. The plant is something of a "shape shifter" in that it can be a vine, a shrub or a ground cover. Landscapers use it to edge sidewalks, provide erosion control on sloping ground or imitate ivy, covering walls, chimneys and fences. But it is as invasive as it is versatile, and can take over a woodlot, damaging and even killing trees, if not controlled. This is easily done by simply cutting the vines at the base. Chapman will be supervising the volunteers.

"Imagine what it's like to be a 300-year-old tree, free and unencumbered for all those years, suddenly constricted and strangled by up to 50 vines crawling all over you," Chapman said. He said cutting through the numerous vines is something like cutting through undercooked spaghetti. "You can grab a handful of a dozen at a time," he said, "they are so thick on some of the trees."

He advises volunteers to wear gloves and bring their own hand pruners, if possible. "We'll have a few," he said, "but not enough for everyone."

That's because he says usually plenty of volunteers show up, about 100 for the five or six times they've visited Meltzer Woods in the past two years. Its reputation has grown. Students from IUPUI volunteered and were so amazed at the site that they went back to tell their professor about it. Now he includes a visit to Meltzer Woods as part of his ecological conservation class. Eco Logic, a small Indiana environmental management firm that specializes in curtailing invasive plant growth, heard about Meltzer Woods, visited and is now donating its services to help clear away the purple wintercreeper that covers the ground and has begun to choke out the diverse plant and animal life previously found there.

Even though there is no cost to attend the event, both families planning to attend from 3 to 6 p.m. and volunteers for work between noon and 3 p.m. need to sign up by calling (317) 631-5263 or e-mailing info@conservingindiana.org. Details and directions will be e-mailed to those planning to attend.

IF YOU GO

WHO: Central Indiana Land Trust.

WHAT: Family Day at Meltzer Woods.

WHEN: Saturday, 3 to 6 p.m.

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Purple wintercreeper, an invasive plant that is threatening Meltzer Woods by choking off trees, wildflowers and small animals who take sanctuary there, will be the target of volunteers who will seek it out and cut it off at the roots from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday. Volunteers at a previous work day there in March had no trouble locating it, as it covered all surfaces, trees and ground, in every direction they looked. Submitted photos

WHERE: Meltzer Woods, 1300 block of County Road 600 East, just north of State Road 244.

DETAILS: Includes hikes, tours of farm buildings, hot dog and marshmallow roast, games and activities for the kids. Also, from noon to 3 p.m., volunteers may help clear away the invasive plant, purple wintercreeper, which is beginning to threaten the trees and the forest floor.

CONTACT: Families and volunteers are asked to sign up by calling (317) 631-5263 or e-mailing info@conservingindiana.org. Details and directions will be e-mailed to those planning to attend.

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