

Rare areas protected from development  
**By Joseph S. Pete**

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A retired White River Township developer bought some farmland and came to love watching birds flit about in the woods at one of his fields.

Pete and Jan Baldwin enjoyed a stretch of wooded land they owned near an oxbow on White River, where bald eagles nest and blue flowers blanket the ground. They didn't want to see development drive out wood ducks, deer and other wildlife.

So they reached an agreement with the Central Indiana Land Trust that will ensure that their 49 acres of land in northwestern White River Township and Marion County remains home to birds and wildflowers

Four other Johnson County property owners have agreed to allow nearly 400 acres of their land to be preserved. The land trust also protects 76 acres at a heron rookery in White River Township and is trying to buy more than 100 acres of forest near Lamb Lake in southern Johnson County for a public nature preserve.

None of the land currently protected is open to the public, but it will remain a sanctuary for wildlife such as warblers, herons and otters.

The donations will ensure that future development won't encroach on all the natural areas in the county, said Paula Baldwin, the daughter of Pete and Jan Baldwin, who both are now in their 90s.

"The last thing they wanted to see was tract housing," she said. "The land is beautiful, and it will be a legacy for generations to come, a legacy that will make the community a better place. We're trying to encourage more people to preserve their land, to leave something behind."

The land trust is pursuing land donations or conservation agreements in 10 counties surrounding Indianapolis, including Johnson, spokeswoman Maria Steiner said.

The nonprofit group owns the Milliard Sutton/Amos Butler Audubon Nature Preserve, where more than 500 blue herons nest along White River in the Center Grove area.

The trust is raising money to create a second nature preserve in the county by buying 112 acres at Blossom Hollow

near Lamb Lake in Hensley Township. Blossom Hollow would be open to the public, and people could hike on footpaths or watch rare birds, such as the cerulean warbler, conservation director Cliff Chapman said.

In Johnson County, the land trust also has reached agreements to protect four other areas that include the county's last remaining buttonbush swamp and the 246-acre Bob's Woods.

Bob's Woods owner Tom Hougham said he hopes to preserve the tract of mature trees because the area provides food for turkeys, deer and other animals. They have fewer and fewer natural habitats, since few old-growth forests are left in central Indiana.

"Years ago, you didn't have anyone like Central Indiana Land Trust, which does wonderful things," he said. "Years ago, only loggers would seek you out about your property."

Landowners can donate property to be conserved in exchange for tax benefits, including an income tax deduction and reduced property taxes. They still own the land but transfer the development rights to the land trust.

Tax benefits were a major consideration for Bill Kirklin, who donated woodland along a creek near Smiley's Mill that had been in his family for 140 years. Most of the land is in a floodplain, so he's not concerned about development.

But the conservation agreement gives him the peace of mind that the land will remain as it's been since his ancestors settled there. His children have moved out of state and don't plan to go into the family business of farming.

The agreements restrict what future property owners can do with land that's forever legally protected from development or clearing.

"You don't know what will happen to your land in 20, 30 or 40 years if you don't set it down on paper," Paula Baldwin said. "That's the only way you can be sure that it stays the way it is."

The Baldwins thought that their land on a bluff over the river was too special to be paved over someday, Paula Baldwin said. The woodland includes tree species that are rare in central Indiana, including slippery elm and Kentucky coffeetree.

Deer, coyotes, foxes and beavers are bountiful there, and the ground is carpeted with bright lavender bluebell wildflowers. Birds such as bald eagles often can be spotted alighting on branches or swooping down by the river.

The land trust wants property that offers a habitat for wildlife or plants or that provides access to nature. In Johnson County, the group is particularly interested in property along White River, woods along streams and woodland near Brown County, such as Bob's Woods, Steiner said.

The Baldwins hope the land trust will be able to preserve most of the land along White River. An uninterrupted stretch of woodland along the banks will protect the water quality and give birds a place to roost, Paula Baldwin said.

“The land has uniqueness in an area where there’s little raw nature,” she said. “Many farmers depend on someday selling their land as a pension plan, so they can afford retirement, and that’s fine; but we have to try to conserve what we can.”

Clearing too many wooded areas to make way for homes and businesses will threaten wildlife that has become scarcer in central Indiana, she said. Future generations of deer for instance will weaken if deprived of their natural habitat and space to roam.

“It’s been easy to find cheap land and keep building out,” she said. “But we don’t want to crowd out all the nature, or we won’t have much to pass on to future generations.”

Photo Caption: A retired White River Township developer bought some farmland and came to love watching birds flit about in the woods at one of his fields.

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