Conservation Kaleidoscope

Volume 28, Issue 6 November/December 2026



What Is a Wetland?

A simple answer to the question, "*What is a wetland?*" is that it is an area where water accumulates. However, wetlands are much more complex than that and are not always easy to define.

Wetlands are identified by three key characteristics. The first, of course, is the presence of water, either above the ground surface or just below it for much of the year. The second characteristic is the presence of *hydric soils*, which form under saturated conditions. Because these soils remain waterlogged for long periods, they become anaerobic, meaning they contain little to no oxygen. The third characteristic is the presence of specialized plants known as *hydrophytic vegetation*, which have adapted to grow in wet conditions.



Lydick Bog, St. Joseph County, Indiana
Photo Credit: AJ Popovic



Wetland Restoration
St. Joseph County, Indiana

Although all wetlands share these characteristics, they can vary greatly depending on factors such as water duration, topography, and climate. Wetlands include marshes, swamps, bogs, and fens, among other types. Together, they support a remarkable diversity of plant life and provide critical habitat for both aquatic and terrestrial wildlife.

Historically, wetlands have not always been valued for their ecological importance. Since the time of early settlement, many people viewed wetlands as obstacles to progress or as unusable wastelands. As a result, wetlands were drained, diverted, and filled to make way for agriculture, transportation, and development. Across the United States, wetlands once covered more than 20 percent of the landscape. Today, only about 5.5 percent remain. Closer to home, wetlands once covered roughly 25 percent of Indiana, but that figure has declined to approximately 3.5 percent.

The loss of wetlands has had significant environmental consequences. Often described as nature's sponge, wetlands play a vital role in storing and slowing the movement of water across the landscape. They help improve water quality by filtering pollutants, reduce soil erosion, and lessen the impacts of runoff and flooding.

Fortunately, many former wetlands that have been degraded or altered for other uses can be restored. Wetland restoration strengthens surrounding ecosystems, improves landscape resilience, and contributes to healthier communities. In the next article, read about a local wetland restoration project in St. Joseph County and learn how restoring these valuable ecosystems benefits both people and nature.

St. Joseph County Soil & Water Conservation District

Protecting Soil
Preserving Water
Serving Community

2903 Gary Drive
Plymouth, IN 46563

www.StJosephSWCD.org

info@StJosephSWCD.org

574-936-2024 x4

ST. JOSEPH COUNTY SWCD

WILD PAGES BOOK CLUB

Calling all bibliophiles!
Read and discuss books about ecology, nature, and conservation with us!

Last Monday of Each Month
6:30- 7:30 PM

Classroom C
Public Library of St. Joseph County
Main Branch
304 S. Main Street, South Bend, IN 46601

November Book
The Backyard Bird Chronicles by Amy Tan
www.StJosephSWCD.org/wild-pages

SMIPP
st joseph marshall counties invasive plant partnership

Join us in the restoration!

SMIPP Land Stewards
Invasive Species Support Group
Wednesday, November 4th ~ 5:30 pm

Potato Creek Weed Wrangle®
Saturday, November 7th ~ 10:00 am



www.SMIPP.org

Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you.

Wendell Berry

Giving Levels



Habitat Heroes
$500 & up



Water Guardians
$250 to 500

Soil Stewards
$100 to $250





Seed Savers
under $100

Every Gift Grows Conservation

Our programs thrive because of our supporters. Finding can change at any time, and your gift - no matter the size - makes a real difference.

Together, we're planting hope and protecting the future of St. Joseph County.

Thank you for being a part of this vital work.



Visit our website for ways to donate.
www.StJosephSWCD.org/donate

Letting the Land Lead

by Kris Vance, NRCS



Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth. They are known to filter water, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, store carbon and provide critical habitat for countless species of wildlife. Yet despite their benefits, many wetlands across Indiana were drained decades ago in an effort to create more farmland and are still threatened today. For Jim Wicks and Tom Malcolm, restoring nearly 48 acres of their St. Joseph County property through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program was about giving one piece of Indiana's landscape the opportunity to return to what it was always meant to be. That journey began long before they ever enrolled in the program.

After retiring in 2017, Jim and Tom moved from Chicago to the 100-acre family farm they purchased from Jim's parents' estate. The property includes woodlands, cropland and a low-lying field of muck that had challenged successive farmers.

"My dad actually started the Wetland Reserve Easement process in 1993," Jim said. "From what I've been told, the program wasn't as robust back then."

Although funding for the easement never materialized at the time, his father's observations about the land always stayed with Jim.

"He was really pretty clear about the fact that this field back here was just so troublesome. It didn't want to be a cropland," Jim said. "The message it was sending was pretty clear that it wasn't going to be reliably productive."

Well before Jim's family purchased the land, drainage tiles kept the field tillable, allowing it to be farmed successfully. More recently, the tiles became heavily silted, making the field far less productive than it had been in the past. When Jim and Tom took ownership of the property, they saw an opportunity to finish what Jim's father had started. At a time when environmental concerns weighed on their minds, restoring the wetland felt like the right decision.

"We heard the drumbeat of environmental catastrophe," Jim said, "and thought maybe this is a good time to reengage the WRE process and let the field return back to its natural state."

Their decision wasn't about improving just one field on their property, they recognized the wetland benefits extended to surrounding communities by slowing floodwaters, improving water quality and creating resilient landscapes. Their focus was about allowing nature to reclaim land that had been trying to return to wetland for decades. It also complemented other conservation work on the farm, including a Conservation Reserve Program waterway that helps manage runoff from surrounding land.

Working with NRCS, they developed a conservation plan tailored to the property. Jim admits the planning process with NRCS field staff was great. However, like many conservation projects, implementation required patience.

"Part of the problem with this program is that we were given a conservation plan that outlines a timeline to get things implemented," Tom explained. "The timeline was a bit unrealistic for our goals, and it quickly got out of order because of weather, finding contractors and other unforeseen circumstances."

Rather than becoming discouraged, they learned to adapt. While Jim admits the final product wasn't the picture he originally had in mind, one piece of advice from NRCS biologist Ryan Owen fundamentally changed how Jim viewed the restoration.

"I wanted a beautiful sweeping meadow with some sheets of water and wild ducks on it," recalls Jim. "[Ryan] said, 'You just have to let the field be what it wants to be and let it go. Let go of your own suppositions about what you want the field to be and let it tell you what it needs to be.'"



Read the rest of the article here: https://www.stjosephswcd.org/post/letting-the-land-lead.

St. Joseph County Soil & Water Conservation District
2903 Gary Drive
Plymouth, IN 46563

www.StJosephSWCD.org

NON PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
US POSTAGE PAID
SOUTH BEND IN
PERMIT NO. 225

Change Service Requested

St. Joseph County Soil & Water Conservation Partnership

St. Joseph County SWCD Partnership Staff
Sarah Longenecker, SWCD
Misty Sorchevich, SWCD
Shelley Chaffee, SWCD
Andrea Baker NRCS

SWCD Supervisors:
Chris Matthys, Chairman
Nathaniel Ness, Vice Chairman
Marty Lappin
Jacob Hogan
John Dooms

SWCD Associate Supervisors:
Ryan Lee
Dave Vandewalle
Chuck Lehman
Randy Matthys
Richard Schmidt
Dave Straughn
Dru Wrasse
Mike Burkholder
Scott Laidig
Joe Gregory

SWCD Honorary Members:
Keith Lineback

Farm Service Agency Staff
Gideon Nobbe, CED
Devan Harrell
Diane Stichter
Michael Cuff

Calendar

November

3rd - Election Day - No County Staff
4th - Land Stewards
7th - Potato Creek Weed Wrangle®
11th - Veteran's Day - Office Closed
17th - Board Meeting
26th - Thanksgiving - Office Closed
27th - No County Staff
30th - *Wild Pages* Book Club

December

15th - Board Meeting
25th - Christmas Day - Office Closed
28th - *Wild Pages* Book Club



Save the Date!

St. Joseph County Soil & Water Conservation District

67th Annual Meeting

Friday, February 5, 2027

Go Green!

Choose to get your newsletter by email! Use the QR code to email us at info@stjosephswcd.org. Be sure to include your mailing address!