

NO TURNING BACK

Milwaukee is currently experiencing a remarkable surge in developmental progress, but what are the environmental implications? Writer Martin Hintz sits down with Howard Aprill, vice president of the Milwaukee Area Land Conservancy, to find out.

BY MARTIN HINTZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT HAAS

Howard Aprill, a Wehr Nature Center naturalist, conducts environmental education and interpretation programs with Milwaukee County Parks. He received his degree in environmental studies at Michigan State University and has also worked with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, with UW-Extension and at Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska. When he has time to spare, Aprill studies the rare Butler's garter snake, whose Wisconsin habitat is threatened by developers.

Aprill is currently vice president of the Milwaukee Area Land Conservancy (MALC), a volunteer conservation group. Among its projects are protection of Carity Prairie, Fitzsimmons Woods and Sidney Woodlands Preserve.

M: Greater Milwaukee is going through a period of growth and development, but what implications are there if open spaces and clean water are not protected?

HA: "There are no do-overs in land preservation. Once an open or green space has been developed, rarely is there a going back. As a result, the clock is ticking when it comes to preserving our significant natural areas."

There is a growing body of research and evidence that shows a strong correlation between people's access/proximity to green spaces and quality of life. In addition, they add tremendously to the economic value of communities."

M: What can citizens do to protect the county's remaining open spaces?

HA: "Get involved. Let elected officials know what you value. They can't read minds. As a citizen you have to be vocal."

Despite being heavily urbanized and losing 93.9 percent of its natural vegetation and nearly all its prairie and oak savanna, Milwaukee County still holds many hidden gems. These secrets showcase scenery, diversified plant life and a wealth of animals.

Properties under the protective wing of the Milwaukee Area Land Conservancy (MALC) include:

► A 22.5-acre conservation easement known as the "**Mayer Land**" in Franklin that adjoins the county-owned Franklin Savanna State Natural Area. Ryan Creek, a Root River tributary, flows through a portion of the site. Currently, however, there is no public access.

► MALC partnered with developer Bill Carity to preserve a 23-acre, rare prairie remnant and restore a sedge meadow complex in Franklin. The project is named **Carity Prairie**, and it is one of the last unplowed prairies in the region. The site is just off St. Martins Road (Highway 100), east of Loomis Road at Prairie Grass Way.

► **Fitzsimmons Woods** comprises approximately 43 acres, with 19 acres owned by Milwaukee County. The wetlands and natural drainageways in the woods are headwaters of Oak Creek and the Root River. The site is a beech-maple woodland, home to 145 native Wisconsin plant species and 25 species of native trees.

► **Sidney Woodlands Preserve** is small, spreading over just 3.76 acres in Glendale. It is a natural buffer separating homes from railroad tracks and nearby factories. Yet the parcel has been extensively studied by naturalists since 1984. As a result, 136 native plant species have been identified, and despite nearby roads, there is space for quiet reflection. Only a few footpaths crisscross the property, allowing visitors to get up close and personal to the beech, red and white oak, sedges and even sarsaparilla. **M**

— Martin Hintz

SECRET SHOWCASES

M: Why is it important to save natural spaces for future generations?

HA: "A local historian stated, 'The past is always present.' Every day, we see the consequences of decisions made and not made by those who came before us. We are a community built upon the vision of our predecessors. The Milwaukee County Park System is a prime example."

I've heard people lament that we don't have people of vision anymore. I couldn't disagree more. They are out there, but they face big challenges."

M: Is it difficult to get citizens to find value in open space?

HA: "There is an irony in how people value open space. That is, they don't fully appreciate or value it until it is threatened or even gone."

M: Are developers the bad guys or are many of them reasonable?

HA: "We don't view developers as the bad guys. In fact, we realize that developers can have some of the most positive influence on the environmental quality of a community."

M: What about politicians?

HA: "Call me an optimist, but I firmly believe that 95 percent of all people who run for public office love and appreciate their community. However, it is virtually impossible to be conversant in all issues. Consequently, I think a majority of elected officials don't fully understand the value of open and green space because they have not been exposed to it. We can fix that by having proactive constituents tell their officials what they value and what they want prioritized."

There is a common fallacy that a community can develop its way into budgetary sustainability. That simply is not true — the math doesn't add up. The concept of a community constantly and perpetually developing undeveloped land is not sustainable. Even for the best-intentioned legislation, it is virtually impossible to anticipate effects that could occur years later."

M: Are you frustrated about what is happening to the county's natural spaces?

HA: "I've experienced my fair share of disappointment and frustration at the loss of some important green spaces. However, those losses have simply added to our sense of urgency."

M: How can the conservancy, developers, politicians and citizenry work together to benefit everyone?

HA: "We have to realize that our common interests outweigh our differences. Everyone can agree that they aspire for communities that are clean, accessible, vibrant, safe and aesthetically pleasing. Let's focus on our common interests, not our differences." **M**