

SPRING/SUMMER 2020

OUR OHIO NATURE

Mitigation Program Is Reviving Ohio's Crippled Streams and Wetlands

Restoration at Strait Creek Marks First Milestone

By Jessica Keith

It's almost like a sixth sense kicks in when Dana Ohman is out in the field, assessing stream health. Sure, there's plenty of science involved. Boulders are counted. Pool depth is measured. Habitat for fish and bugs is evaluated. The list goes on.

But then there's the art of it all. The space within which decidedly unscientific things like senses and imagination come into play.

"You can actually tell a lot about stream health just by the way the stream feels on the bottom of your feet," Ohman informs me. "A stream bottom that's stable tells you one thing, while squishiness tells you another."

It's a skill presumably acquired only by those who have long since lost track of the number of times they've walked in a creek bed. Ohman falls into that category.

A stream and wetland mitigation specialist for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio, Ohman's job is to help restore waterways and floodplains as part of our mitigation program. There's a lot at stake. In a state that's lost 90 percent of its original wetlands, good mitigation is of the utmost importance.

TNC's mitigation program is founded on federal and state laws that require developers to avoid and minimize harm to wetlands and streams.

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Bill Stanley © David Ike

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

In our first decades at The Nature Conservancy, we focused on protecting nature from people. Our vision today is a world where the diversity of life thrives, and people protect nature for its own sake and for its ability to fulfill our needs and enrich our lives.

This current vision drives us to better understand how our work touches the lives of people in and around the places where we do conservation. We still have a lot to learn and do, but as first steps we want to make nature accessible to more people and to be informed by a greater diversity of perspectives in our own workplace and in all facets of our work.

On the next page, our conservation and volunteer coordinator Angie Burke shares her own touching story about the role nature played in shaping who she's become. Inspired, she's vowed to create more opportunities to engage younger and more diverse communities.

Angie's story underscores the need to create more access to the places we've protected. On page 6 you'll read about our Geauga County-based Lucia Nash Preserve, which will be open to the public this summer. To the south, at our Edge of Appalachia Preserve in Adams County, we've added another point of access with the creation of the Helen C. Black Trail at Cedar Falls, which also opens this summer.

I'm also excited to share that we're partnering with Groundwork Ohio River Valley to employ young urban adults in helping with a restoration project at Jacoby Creek as part of

our stream and wetland mitigation program. Groundwork Ohio River Valley offers job training programs that provide participants with access to professional networks and environmental careers.

As we reach out to new communities and further commit to diversity, equity and inclusion, we are deepening our understanding of our role in society. And we are finding that this is helping us to grow as people and as an organization.

I thank you for supporting us as we work to conserve Ohio's natural wonders in ways that are uplifting to all.

Yours in Conservation,

Bill Stanley
Ohio State Director
The Nature Conservancy

P.S. As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting our lives in profound ways. By the time you read these words, many weeks later, much may have changed. One thing that will not have changed, though, is the interconnectedness of all life, so deeply underscored during our crisis. This thread of interconnectedness is why we at TNC do what we do, and it's present in the stories you'll read here. The natural world offers us sanctuary in trying times; we should remember it also offers us almost everything else on which we depend. Thank you for helping protect it.

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46.1
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COVER: Strait Creek restoration © Dana Ohman/TNC

Inspired By Nature? Pass It On!

By Angie Burke

Growing up in urban Chicago, my “nature” was grassy areas that surrounded picnic pavilions or my own small urban yard. The beauty and diversity of plants and animals was something I thought was real only in the Amazon rainforest I saw in Scholastic magazines at the library. My family didn’t have the means to travel or to explore anything beyond the local park.

“By making nature accessible and relevant to youth, we can help spark an appreciation for it.”

— Angie Burke, conservation and volunteer coordinator

It was years later, when I was in college, that the moniker The Prairie State began to mean something to me.

While studying at Northern Illinois University, I participated in a volunteer

event for extra credit at The Nature Conservancy’s Nachusa Grasslands in Illinois. Standing on that prairie knob, surrounded by smiling land stewards, seeds and sunshine, sparked in me an everlasting passion to conserve, protect and connect communities to natural areas.

I now get to do just that as the conservation and volunteer coordinator for TNC in Ohio. I am inspired by the youth I have the opportunity to work with, from elementary students at TNC’s Bissell Nature Center exclaiming at a salamander scurrying across the path, to high school students with Groundwork Ohio River Valley who are improving water quality in urban areas. These moments speak to a collective multi-generational commitment to protecting and keeping our natural areas healthy for all to enjoy.

From seeing the wildflowers bloom in a restored prairie, to flipping over a



Angie Burke © TNC

downed log in a nearby forest to look for small critters, there’s no substitute for the wonder that comes from natural areas. By making nature accessible and relevant to youth, we can help spark an appreciation for it.

My experience in college with TNC shaped who I am. I am honored to play a role in making similar experiences available to a young, diverse group of future conservationists across The Buckeye State now and for years to come.

2019 Volunteer Program Highlights

Volunteer support allows us to protect some of the state’s most important and beloved natural areas.



Annual Hours

6,600+

Removing invasive plants, building trails and planting native species in the Buckeye State

Our Volunteers



2020 Stewardship



We are offering more opportunities for the whole family to participate. To find out more, visit nature.org/ohio or email ohvolunteer@tnc.org

Partners



11 organizations came together to help advance conservation across Ohio



The Nature Conservancy's Ohio Mitigation Program has restored 1.3 miles of stream and 1.7 acres of wetlands at Strait Creek, located in southern Ohio's Brown County, transforming the valley from one dominated by straightened ditches and abandoned agricultural fields, to meandering streams teeming with life and surrounded by healthy wetlands and forest. © Dana Ohman /TNC

“Sometimes scientists and engineers think restoration is just about form and function, but nature can be messy; it doesn’t necessarily follow along with mathematical equations.”

— Dana Ohman, stream and wetland mitigation specialist for The Nature Conservancy

When regulators consider the impacts to be unavoidable, they must be mitigated by protecting or restoring nearby water resources. In the past, many of the projects undertaken by developers on their own were ecologically unsuccessful.

Now regulators prefer that developers pay a fee to an approved mitigation provider like TNC to do the required environmental

restoration work. TNC is able to collect and aggregate these fees and apply them to the best possible stream and wetland conservation projects it can identify.

Today, five years after the launch of the program, the mitigation team is in the final stages of its first large-scale effort, at Strait Creek, a

tributary of the Ohio River located in rural southern Ohio's Brown County.

“I remember walking along Strait Creek for the first time and thinking, this is going to be awesome,” Ohman says.

What Ohman saw that day was a creek that essentially had been moved out of the way. Here, in the rugged foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, land suitable for agriculture has always been at a premium. Pushing streams toward the outer edges of a valley afforded settlers more space to grow crops and create infrastructure like roadways as populations expanded. In doing so, many streams like Strait Creek were straightened and channelized, resulting in issues with erosion, flooding and loss of both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitat.

Where most people would have seen only a degraded waterway, Ohman saw potential.

“You have to read the land, and imagine it prior to European settlement,” she says. “What the tree cover might have been like, how the stream would have moved through the valley, what plants would have existed along the banks.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

90

Percent of Ohio's wetlands that have been destroyed or degraded since the late 18th century



Ohio Mitigation Program team, from left to right: Conservation Coordinator Kat Crowley, Restoration Ecologist Mick Micacchion, Stream and Wetland Mitigation Coordinator Brian Gara, Stream and Wetland Mitigation Specialist Dana Ohman, Mitigation Program Manager Devin Schenk © TNC

Armed with a vision and plenty of stream quality data, Ohman's job is to then help create a restoration plan. In the case of Strait Creek, this plan will result in dramatic ecological change. The valley is being transformed from one dominated by straightened ditches and abandoned agricultural fields, to streams teeming with life that meander through abundant wetlands and riparian forest.

"It's like going your doctor," she says. "Your symptoms are evaluated, and you're given a prescription. We write prescriptions, too."

These days, Ohman and her teammates are writing plenty of prescriptions.

The mitigation program has restored 1.3 miles of stream and 1.7 acres of wetlands through its project at Strait Creek and has another 30 restoration projects in various stages of planning. In addition, the mitigation program has protected nearly 70 acres of high-quality wetlands from development.



Beaver © istockphoto

While the final stage of restoration at Strait Creek won't take place until later this spring, when streambank vegetation is planted, Dana says the project already received an unofficial certification of success when a family of beavers moved in early last winter.

"Beavers are nature's original environmental engineers," she says. "They'll help take it from here."

Staff Spotlight: Dana Ohman

A certified drone pilot, Dana Ohman is cool in the eyes her 10 and 7-year-old sons. "Every year at Christmas they ask for a drone like I use at work," she says. "They say they want to be a drone pilot like me when they grow up."

The Pataskala native agrees that operating the Ohio Chapter's drone is one of the coolest—and most valuable—parts of her job as a stream and wetland mitigation specialist for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. (See cover story on mitigation program.)

"In terms of getting a viewpoint, there's nothing else that can give you that same visual of the dynamic of a stream," she says. While she's skilled at studying a stream from above, it's what lies hidden beneath the waters that she finds most captivating.

"When I was an undergrad at Otterbein University, I had the opportunity to do electrofishing," she says. "I loved it."

The experience, which entails using a weak electric field to capture and study fish, led her to get her Master of Science in wildlife and fisheries conservation from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

"I did my thesis on fish communities and large woody debris," Ohman says. "So I learned a lot about habitat restoration."



© Mike Ohman

Post-graduate work as a fisheries biologist provided even more opportunity to grow her skillset in fish community analysis, which she says is an important piece of evaluating restoration projects.

"Sometimes scientists and engineers think restoration is just about form and function, but nature can be messy; it doesn't necessarily follow along with mathematical equations," Ohman says.

Ohman's current role with TNC brought her back to Ohio, where she says there's plenty of opportunity for conservation. She's glad, she says, that her part includes being in the water.

"Nothing beats getting to be at work in the water on a hot summer day."

More Nature Conservancy Land Available for Exploration!

Lucia S. Nash Preserve and Helen C. Black Trail at Cedar Falls To Open This Summer

Nature is a source of wonder for so many. It's proven to help us feel better both emotionally and physically and can inspire the conservationist in all of us. In that spirit, we are proud to make more nature available for exploration.



Snow Lake at Lucia S. Nash Preserve © Randall Schieber



Cedar Falls © Rick Conner

Lucia S. Nash Preserve

(opening this summer)

Located about 45 minutes east of Cleveland, The Nature Conservancy's 650-acre Lucia S. Nash Preserve protects some of Ohio's finest glacially formed wetlands, including White Pine Bog Forest, a designated National Natural Landmark, and Snow Lake, one of the most pristine natural lakes in the state.

Established in 1994, the preserve was originally named White Pine Bog but was changed in 2017 to honor the dedicated service of Lucia S. Nash (1928–2017), a lifelong Cleveland-area resident and champion of conservation. Her love of nature, handed down from her parents Kelvin and Eleanor Smith, inspired her to volunteer tirelessly for TNC in Ohio and Arizona.

The preserve's Barbara A. Lipscomb Trail, named after lifelong supporter and former trustee of TNC's Ohio and global boards, includes two miles of easy hiking trail that explores the preserve's key features.

TNC sincerely thanks honorary life trustee Bill Ginn, The Kelvin & Eleanor Smith Foundation, the Cleveland Foundation, Moen, Joseph Lipscomb and Laura Will, and William and Margaret Lipscomb for their contributions in protecting and creating access to this important natural area.

Learn more at [nature.org/LuciaNashPreserve](https://www.nature.org/LuciaNashPreserve)

The Helen C. Black Trail at Cedar Falls

(opening this summer)

Situated at the intersection of the prairies of the west and the Appalachian Plateau of the east, the Richard and Lucile Durrell Edge of Appalachia Preserve protects some of the most biologically diverse natural areas in the Midwestern United States. The preserve encompasses rugged woodlands, prairie openings, impressive promontories, clear streams and waterfalls—including Cedar Falls, which soon can be accessed via the new Helen C. Black Trail at Cedar Falls.

The three-mile, round-trip trail to Cedar Falls begins in a grove of eastern red cedar trees and ends at a dramatic overlook perched on a cliff above the falls. Along the way, visitors will discover diverse deciduous forest, cross several rocky tributary streams and pass through the boulder field—a narrow area of Cedar Run gorge where massive blocks of Peebles Dolomite have fallen from nearby cliffs.

TNC expresses appreciation to those integral in the development of the trailhead: Brush Creek Township Trustees, Adams County Commissioners, Adams County Historical Society and The Clean Ohio Fund.

Learn more at [nature.org/EdgeofAppalachia](https://www.nature.org/EdgeofAppalachia)



Satellite image of Sandusky Bay © NOAA



Lake whitefish © Alexis Sakas/TNC

State's H2Ohio Fund Supporting Wetland Restoration

Since the late 1990s, the rate and severity of harmful algal blooms in Ohio have been increasing steadily, putting human health and Ohio's economy at risk. Launched last summer, and led in part by The Nature Conservancy, Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Fund aims to address the state's water quality issues. H2Ohio provides \$172 million for water quality improvement projects over two years, including \$46 million in the first year for nature-based solutions, such as creating and restoring wetlands and floodplains—for which TNC advocated strongly.

TNC's work to advance restoration in Sandusky Bay is one of the first to receive support through H2Ohio, which is providing \$3.7 million to turn restoration concepts into shovel-ready engineering and design plans. The effort is aimed at reducing wave energy by using innovative methods involving a mix of manmade and natural infrastructure—potentially including dredged material reuse, beach restoration, and concrete structures. A better-functioning bay will encourage the growth of native vegetation and help alleviate the occurrence of harmful algal blooms.

H2Ohio is also providing funding to TNC to restore 137 acres of coastal wetland at Maumee Bay State Park. Through a partnership with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, TNC will improve water level management in order to create a healthy, well-functioning wetland system that not only helps to clean water, but also creates important coastal wildlife habitat for birds and other plant and animal species.

Research to Inform Fisheries Restoration

Great Lakes fisheries have been drastically altered by habitat loss, overfishing and invasive species. As part of an ambitious effort to restore the diversity, resiliency and productivity of Great Lakes fisheries, The Nature Conservancy is researching lake whitefish. Once a plentiful forage fish that supported the largest freshwater fishery in the world, lake whitefish has shown substantial population declines in Lake Erie. This past fall, through a collaboration with the University of Toledo, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Great Lakes Acoustic Telemetry Observation System, Michigan State University, United States Geological Survey, and Szuch Fishery, acoustic tags were implanted in 15 lake whitefish in order to track their movement over the next two years. Findings will help inform strategies aimed at restoring the species.




In Memoriam: Irv Bieser

We are saddened by the passing of Ohio Honorary Life Trustee Irvin G. Bieser, Jr. Irv joined The Nature Conservancy's board of trustees in 1989, served as board chair from 1993 through 1996, and became an honorary life trustee in 1998. He was involved in many community and conservation initiatives, including service in the Peace Corps, engagement with many Dayton arts organizations, leadership with Five Rivers MetroParks, and protection of the Little Miami River. Irv always provided wise counsel in a way that showed support and helped to guide us forward. He was a strong advocate and his engagement with TNC and others helped to protect tens of thousands of acres of beautiful natural areas. We are grateful for his many years of dedicated service.

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Strait Creek restoration © Dana Ohman/TNC

Mitigation Program is Reviving Ohio's Crippled Streams and Wetlands




Five years after its launch, the Ohio Mitigation Program is in the final stages of its first large-scale effort, located at Strait Creek—an Ohio River tributary. Discover how the team restored 1.3 miles of stream and 1.7 acres of wetlands to bring an important waterway back to life.



Snow Lake © Terry Seidel/TNC

Help create a sustainable world for generations to come.

Contact Alan Monroe with The Nature Conservancy in Ohio to learn how creating a donor-advised fund, establishing a life-income gift such as a charitable remainder trust, or making a gift of real estate can benefit both you and the lands and waters you love.

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