

EFROYMSON PRAIRIE AT
Kankakee Sands
SUMMER 2026

Game Changer: TNC's First Motus Tower in Indiana at Kankakee Sands

Motus towers help reveal where birds travel, when they move, and what challenges they face along the way. The Motus Network, launched by Birds Canada in 2014, has hundreds of towers set up all across the globe, including right here at Kankakee Sands!

The newly installed Motus tower at Kankakee Sands will help us to answer important questions about our bird communities. Bird conservation has always been a key part of our work at Kankakee Sands. With a wide diversity of prairie habitats across the property, 250 bird species have been documented at Kankakee Sands – some nesting, others stopping briefly along their migration routes. Of the birds species that are not year-round residents, we have questions, such as where do they go when they leave, how far do they travel, and are the same individuals returning each year?

Motus is Latin for “movement,” and the Motus towers use radio frequencies to detect bird migrations. Small radio transmitters are attached to the legs of birds via leg bands which broadcast a unique signal. When a bird with a tracking device passes by the towers, its identity is documented allowing us to map its annual migration. This incredible technology detects banded birds over a several miles radius.

Within days of our Kankakee Sands Motus tower being installed, it recorded its first two detections! Within three weeks, that number had grown to five. For a new station, this was incredibly encouraging—some towers have long gaps without having a tagged bird fly by. One of our first detections was a wood thrush. This bird had been tagged in Honduras and migrated north across the Gulf of Mexico to the Texas coast, then continued through Missouri before reaching our preserve. Very few people would think to connect Honduras, central Mexico and Newton County, Indiana—but birds like these do every year.

In the months and years ahead, the tower at Kankakee Sands will continue to detect new birds. Each signal adds to our understanding of migration and reinforces a powerful truth: **Everything is connected**. Motus simply helps us to see it more clearly than ever before.

[Access the full Motus story by Trevor Edmonson](#)

PHOTOS: (left) Motus tower, installed this spring at Kankakee Sands. The project was made possible with support from our Indiana Board, in honor of former Director of Conservation Matt Williams, whose passion for birds continues to inspire us. Additional support came from the Sam Shine Foundation and Indiana Audubon. (right) Wood thrush © Matt Williams



Student Conservation Interns

The newest round of Newton County Student Conservation interns started in June, and we are so glad they are here!

In this cohort are three in-coming seniors at North Newton High School: **Nick Albrecht** based at Kankakee Sands, **Patrick St. Dennis III** based at the Newton County Soil and Water Conservation District, and **Duke Mark** based at the DNR LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area.

This trio has been busy with orientations, waterway testing, macroinvertebrate study on Beaver Lake Ditch, land fill inspections, seed harvest, native plant garden maintenance, invasive plant species removal, as well as banding geese, ducks and dove. They are a fun and hardworking group.

Thank you to the Jasper Newton Foundation and the Newton County Economic Development Commission for making this internship possible. Welcome, Duke, Nick and Patrick!

Drake University Interns

Audrey Fedunok and Sydney Eaton have just completed their 8-week summer internships at Kankakee Sands through the Jay N. Darling Institute at Drake University.

“ I have enjoyed learning how to identify both native and invasive plant species and use new machinery. I am grateful for this experience because it has taught me many skills that will be necessary in environmental fields and has opened my mind to the unique career paths centered around conservation. ”

Audrey Fedunok

“ I enjoyed the hands-on experience in the field and learning how to operate new pieces of equipment. It is so beneficial to see the real-world application of what I have been learning in my classes with GIS and about recovering habitat fragmentation. ”

Sydney Eaton

Audrey and Sydney – thank you for spending your summer with us! We wish you the best as you return to Drake University to start your sophomore year.

Wish List

- Compact drip torches for prescribed fire ignitions, two desired = \$180 each
- Prescribed fire Nomex jumpsuits, three desired = \$425 each
- Arm rests for backless bench seats at the Bison Viewing Area, three sets desired = \$550 per set
- Saunders slim metal clipboards with storage for data collection, five total, \$22 each
- Milwaukee batteries for power tools, two-pack, \$120

PHOTOS: (left) Duke Mark, Nick Albrecht and Patrick St. Dennis III at the Bison Viewing Platform overlooking the flower-filled Wet Prairie Trail. (right) Audrey Fedunok and Sydney Eaton after a morning of seed harvesting at Kankakee Sands.
Photos © Alyssa Nyberg/TNC



Research Spotlight: Bee Researcher

Isabelle Turner learned about prairie restoration as an undergraduate at Purdue University and visited Kankakee Sands to collect seed for a research project. Since then, she has developed a passion for prairie research and is now pursuing her doctorate degree at Miami University of Ohio.

Isabelle has also developed a passion for pollinators. At Kankakee Sands, she is combining her love of prairie and pollinators by researching how disturbance affects ground-nesting bees.

Native bees need ample foraging and nesting resources. Of the 500 species of bees native to the Midwest, the vast majority of them build their nests in the ground. Ground-nesting bees generally prefer to dig their nests in bare, loose soils. Small disturbances, such as mounds created when plains pocket gophers dig burrows, create conditions ripe for bee nesting.

In order to determine how plains pocket gopher mounds influence bee nesting, Isabelle sets up mini white tents on pocket gopher mounds and nearby vegetated areas. These tents, called *emergence traps*, collect insects that emerge from the ground, so that she can see the abundance and diversity of bees nesting in that specific area.

Results from this project will help inform management of nesting habitat for our native pollinators and illuminate a surprising species interaction between ground-nesting bees and plains pocket gophers.

Franklin's Ground Squirrel Update

The joint project between the Indiana DNR, Purdue Fort Wayne and TNC to reintroduce the state endangered Franklin's Ground Squirrel to Kankakee Sands continues for a third year this year. In addition to tracking the current population, an additional 25 Franklin's ground squirrels were brought from South Dakota this year to help bolster the genetic pool as the species gets settled at Kankakee Sands.



Did you see a Franklin's Ground Squirrel? Report it!

To help inform the researchers about the squirrels' whereabouts, email fgsreintroduction@gmail.com or use this QR code if you see any Franklin's ground squirrels at or near Kankakee Sands!

There is always so much to do and see at Kankakee Sands, and we're so glad that visitors are coming to enjoy it all! Kankakee Sands is free and open to the public every day of the year!

KANKAKEE SANDS
3294 NORTH U.S. 41
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Connecting People with Nature

During the spring and summer, we hosted so many groups at Kankakee Sands! We were joined by students from the University of Illinois, middle school students from Indiana Ag and Technical School, elementary school students from Lorenzo Elementary, Wild Indiana Outdoor Adventure Camp of Covington Elementary School, Cedar Lake Cub Scouts, birding groups with the Indiana Audubon Birding Festival and also with Dunes Calumet Audubon, Porter County Master Gardeners, and most recently all three branches of the Newton County summer reading program patrons. We had such a blast and we are grateful to the groups that visited!

Volunteer With Us!

All year round, we host volunteer workdays at Kankakee Sands to allow people to connect with nature while lending a hand through harvesting native plant seeds, caring for native plant display gardens and joining us for Weed Wrangles™ to remove invasive plant species. If you'd like to receive a weekly email summarizing nature-based events and activities in the Kankakee Sands area, reach out to Alyssa Nyberg at anyberg@tnc.org.

Maintaining the Magic at Kankakee Sands

Kankakee Sands is a magical place! To keep the preserve as healthy and robust as possible, we have recently posted visitor rules on several of our preserve signs. While some activities are not allowed, the fun ones are always welcome: nature observation, walking and hiking, photography, picnicking, driving tours, or even a bike ride on roads alongside the preserve!

Please join us at Kankakee Sands for FREE family-friendly nature exploration! Below is a snapshot of some of our upcoming events. Hope to see you there!

- Yoga on the Prairie, August 22
- Monarch Migration Celebration, Sept. 12
- Conrad by Moonlight Hike, October 24
- Day after Thanksgiving Hike, Nov. 27
- Happy Owlidays Hike, December 19

Visit nature.org/events to learn more about these events.



PHOTOS: (top) University of Illinois Conservation Biology Class visits Kankakee Sands. © Johnny Baakliny

(bottom) Gearing up for a Weed Wrangle™ at Conrad Station Savanna. © Alyssa Nyberg/TNC

