



Leelanau
CONSERVANCY

*Conserving the Land, Water and
Scenic Character of Leelanau County*

2024 Fall Newsletter

Letter from our Executive Director

Enthusiasm is one of the most powerful engines of success. When you do a thing, do it with all your might. Put your whole soul into it. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Whatever it is that you love about Leelanau, it all starts with the land and water. It all begins right there. Without our freshwater lakes and streams, our forests, our family farms, little else would mean as much as it does. Surrounded by all those blues and greens, they bring real magic to all we do, everywhere we go.

Leelanau is a way of life. It is a guiding light for our lives. It is as much a landmark of blue waters and verdant lands as it is a landmark in our hearts and minds. As much as Leelanau has been discovered by the rest of the world, it remains relatively—and remarkably—unchanged. That feels nothing short of miraculous. But it is no lucky accident.

The truth is that the forces of change are vast and unceasing. Climate volatility, poorly planned development, environmental degradation of immense proportions, and more have irrevocably altered the Earth. Across America, communities once rich in ecological integrity, rural charm, and scenic beauty have rapidly lost these treasures to profit-driven decisions. Though many people cared, few communities acted to protect these places. It is rare indeed when a community stands up for Nature. To have done so for the last 36 years here in Leelanau County is extraordinary. It has taken a mountain of effort, an ocean of action. You are the ones who are making it happen, and we celebrate you and your commitment to preserving what matters most.

If the forces of change are unceasing, together we must be tireless as well to continue to meet the challenges we face. The good news is that we are more enthusiastic than ever at the prospect of preserving Leelanau for all time. Because of you, we expanded our Natural Areas in the past year, adding 180 more acres and nearly 10 more miles of trails. We protected an additional 4.3 miles of shoreline and conserved over 1,000 more acres of family farms and forests home to wildlife.

In total, you have made it possible to protect more than 18,000 acres of Leelanau's precious lands and waters, including 65 miles of shoreline and 50 miles of trails for all to enjoy.

Yet so many critical lands remain at risk. With your help, we are ready to step up to the challenge. As I write this, over 30 projects are in the works that would permanently preserve more than 3,000 additional acres. Just one current example is adding 99 acres to our Kehl Lake Natural Area. This unique land will extend a key wildlife corridor and provide a home for bobcats, bears, red-shouldered hawks, and many more native species. Growing the Kehl Lake Natural Area to 378 acres will expand the core of a network of over 2,800 acres of protected lands and help maintain a vital part of Leelanau's natural world—where wildlife and plants that have existed for thousands of years can continue to live undisturbed, where change happens on the forest's schedule, not the developer's. With every acre protected, we are not only protecting land, but we are also preserving your stories, your memories, and the essence of what makes Leelanau County unlike anywhere else.

It all starts with the land and water. We plant trees whose shade we may never sit under, knowing our efforts will outlive us. That is the very reason we do it. Although we will not witness the full fruits of our labor, generations beyond us will—thanks to your enduring support. We do not know precisely what the future looks like, but we do know there will be land to farm, trails to walk, and a home for wildlife until the end of time.

Together—with all our might, enthusiasm, and soul—we can ensure that the Leelanau you love will always be the Leelanau you know.

Sincerely,
Tom Nelson
Executive Director





Photo by
Mark Smith

- Protected Vineyards -

The plentiful vineyards and wineries of Leelanau are part of its culture and heritage. And today, it is widely known that the peninsula is well suited for growing grapes. Lake Michigan creates a microclimate that moderates temperatures, reducing the risk of frost and extending the growing season. This lake effect, combined with its relatively cool temperatures, helps preserve the delicate balance of acidity and sweetness in the grapes, which is necessary for making good wine. The county also benefits from well-drained sandy soil, which grapevines need. Leelanau's rolling landscape provides good air circulation, preventing icy morning frosts from settling on delicate vines.

Beyond being an ideal location for cultivating grapes, these places are part of Leelanau's community identity and pride. Often, they serve as

social hubs and symbols of local craftsmanship. They also play a key role in land conservation by preserving open spaces that might otherwise be developed. Protecting these businesses not only supports the economy and the environment, but also the cultural and social fabric of communities.

In the following pages, local winemakers Creighton and McKenzie Gallagher talk about their journey in running a vineyard and winery. We are proud to have worked with them on using a Conservation Easement (CE) to protect 80 acres of their land, including rolling vineyards and woods. Listed below are Leelanau's vineyards and wineries that have been permanently protected by a CE; locally loved and forever preserved.



- **Rove Estate (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements)**

- **Brengman Brothers**

- **45 North**

- **Nathaniel Rose**

- **Mawby Vineyards**

- **Previously Boskydel Vineyard (Regional Conservation Protection Program), new owner/new winery coming**

- **Roth Whaleback Meadow**

- **Drumlin Vineyards**

- **Black Star Farms Vineyard**

Rove Winery Blends Family Tradition with Conservation

The Gallagher family have a vision for the future as they secure a Conservation Easement on their beloved vineyard. With roots stretching back generations, they are not just cultivating grapes but nurturing a legacy that celebrates the land and the joy of winemaking for their children and beyond.

Photo of Rove Winery at
The Gallagher Estate





Sugar Loaf comes to mind when thinking about the highest point in Leelanau County. You might be surprised that the highest point on the peninsula is a wooded hilltop bordering the Rove Winery vineyards. These rolling acres are now protected forever with a Conservation Easement (CE), a legal agreement that allows landowners to protect their property from development or other changes, ensuring that it remains preserved for conservation purposes forever. Funding from the Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP - ALE) helped to make this CE possible.

As young farmers, Creighton and McKenzie Gallagher are in a busy season of their lives. Their youngest, Rory, will be a year old this winter. The pair are proud parents to five and have introduced the ways of farming to them throughout their childhoods. "We're very intentional in having them do things at the farm, but they work here too," said Creighton. "It's a big thing for us because it's a tradition in our family."

Creighton is a fifth-generation farmer and has family roots in the area dating back to the mid-1800s. When his grandfather bought a farm in the '70s, he grew various cherries. "He had grown up on a dairy farm, and broke away from that by planting cherries," said Creighton. A farmer is constantly improving, whether that means planting a new orchard, learning new management tactics, or shifting what kind of crops they produce. Creighton grew up with an innate sense of the pragmatism farming requires. "My dad continued cherry farming, but we broke away and started growing grapes. Each of our generations has had its own path."

Rove Winery at The Gallagher Estate is a beloved hangout. "We changed the name from Rove Estate to pay homage to our family's farming heritage. Rove Winery at the Gallagher Estate brings in a place of home which is especially important in the world of wine. We are an estate winery which means we are focused on our unique terroir and microclimates that can only be found on our farm," McKenzie said. Undoubtedly, part of the

Creighton and McKenzie Gallagher enjoy a quick break at the vineyard.



lure is the Gallagher family's warmth, but the estate's grapes make for popular local wine. The vineyard grows twelve different types of wine grapes. "They're vinifera grapes, which originated in Europe and grow in places like France and Italy. We make wines like Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Franc, and others," said Creighton. They have nearly 34 acres of vineyards.

A love of grapes drew Creighton and McKenzie to pursue cultivating them, but there is more to it than that. Once a harvest is complete, farmers cannot control how much their crops will sell for. With grapes, the Gallaghers saw a path to more control over the outcome of their product. "Farming is already difficult," Creighton explained. "And it's only getting harder. We wanted to have a value-added product and be able to sell to the end consumer." Growing their own grapes to produce their own wine was the perfect answer. In 2011, he and McKenzie bought the farm from his dad. They started planting grapes in 2012 and opened Rove Winery in 2016.

Most farmers do not have to deal with branding and marketing efforts, but the Gallaghers embraced the challenge. Their logo, a goose in flight, represents

their Irish heritage. Irish soldiers, known as the Wild Geese, fled Ireland in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. They sought military service abroad, primarily in European armies, to escape English rule and the loss of their lands. Some of these Irishmen went on to become prolific winemakers. "So, there was this society of Irish winemakers worldwide, and they started calling themselves the Wine Geese. We felt so inspired by that," said McKenzie. "We were in our 20s when we started this, and it felt like such a pipe dream. When those exiles fled on cargo ships, they had no idea where they were going, and we initially felt a little like that. Rove means to go on a journey without knowing the destination."

The Gallaghers do not know where their journey will continue to take them, but they do know that the land they farm will remain constant for the future. "We enjoy farming, the products we make, and sharing them with others," said Creighton. "And we enjoy sharing this with our kids. We want to pass down that appreciation for the land and the fulfillment of farming. It is a privilege in this day and age to be able to farm."



Secrets of the Swamp: Finding Herpetofauna at Cedar River Preserve

Dive into the captivating world of herpetology as a team of experts explore the Cedar River Preserve, revealing the important role of wetland habitat for reptiles and amphibians. Director of Natural Areas and Preserves Becky Hill joins the herpetologists to see how they unveil the hidden wonders of these creatures in one of nature's most diverse ecosystems.



Within the Cedar River Preserve, a wild world quietly bustles.

A Floral Quality Assessment was done at the preserve to determine what rare and interesting plants could be found there. A high score of 91.1 indicated that an impressive diversity of flora thrives at CRP, including uncommon carnivorous plants like sundew, bladderwort, and pitcher plants. What other creatures could inhabit the preserve if these unique plants lived here?

David Mifsud specializes in herpetofauna, the study of reptiles and amphibians. Two years ago, he began working with the Leelanau Conservancy to survey the herpetofauna at CRP, first by studying the preserve's history and previous species found, then surveying it for the first time last summer.

Director of Natural Areas and Preserves Becky Hill recently joined David and his team on a survey. They started at the Ingraham Preserve at Cedar River Preserve and worked towards the fen.

"We'll start with the uplands," said David. He instructed his teammates and Becky not to walk clustered together but rather spread out in a horizontal line. They scan the ground, looking for the most minuscule movements. Logs are gently overturned, and dense piles of leaves and brush are sorted through. "We've been on the fringes of finding box turtles. They're looking for blackberries, raspberries, and things like that right now," said David. "We've seen red-spotted newts, ribbon snakes, garter snakes, water snakes, green snakes, red-backed salamanders."

Moments later, a northern leopard frog was spotted. Palm-sized, bright green, and adorned with leopard print, it awaited the afternoon sun near ferns. "These guys are always looking for sunny opportunities. They go back and forth between sunning themselves, eating, and getting shade." The frog was documented and photographed, and a note was made of where it was seen.

The team ventured further into a stretch of woodlands before reaching the



spongy edge of the wetlands. Equipped with tall rubber boots, they started trekking through. David uses a variety of techniques to survey herpetofauna, including trapping. “We don’t have any traps out here,” he said. “There’s not much open water in the fen to support a turtle trap. We need at least a foot of water.” The crew has, however, strategically placed pieces of sheet metal to attract “herps.” The sheet metal traps heat from the sun, creating a warm but shaded oasis that snakes, salamanders, and other amphibians and reptiles love. On this trip, he is surprised not to have found any movement under the pieces.

At the end of the wetlands, Cedar River ripples peacefully. A suggestion was implemented to place basking logs near the water’s edge at Kehl Lake. Becky and the stewardship crew soon saw lots of painted turtles utilizing them after. David has several suggestions like these to continue to attract herpetofauna to the preserve. “It’s been amazing to see such instant results from implementing the basking log recommendation,” said Becky. “We plan to do the same at the Cedar River Preserve. Another

simple Best Management Practice we plan to do is create woody debris and brush piles from invasive shrub removal. Instead of removing or chipping the autumn olive shrubs, we can create brush piles in the upland habitat. This not only reduces the amount of work on our end but would improve habitat for herpetofauna and hopefully attract new species to colonize the area.”

Habitat loss has contributed significantly to the decline of herpetofauna species over the last several decades. Protected places are key to keeping these populations intact. Before Becky and David parted ways, he stressed the importance of rich habitats like the Cedar River Preserve. “This is irreplaceable for herpetofauna,” explained David. “You just don’t always see high-quality habitats like this.” Thanks to your generosity, these delicate ecosystems, and others, flourish. Each discovery, every species documented, underscores your critical role in protecting Leelanau’s natural world, where turtles bask on logs, salamanders sunbathe, and frogs leap between endless ferns.

Take A Look!

A lot's been going on. Check out a few snapshots of what the Conservancy has been up to over the last few months.

1. Our 2024 AmeriCorps members Alicia Cooper (left) and Tyler Lancaster are enjoying a much-needed water break while out cleaning up trails.
2. The Crystal River Restoration Project Team and partners, supported through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), a program made possible through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), attended the Crystal River Float and Pre-Construction Ceremony this August. With construction of Crossing #3 (first crossing downstream of Fisher Dam) happening this September. The Team wanted to move forward with construction in a way by holding a river connection float from Fisher Dam down to Crossing #3. RCPP is the largest tribal led collaborative of its kind in the nation, led by our partners at Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians.
3. Director of Natural Areas Becky Hill and Land Steward Caleb Garone transplanting lycophytes into the fern garden at Palmer Woods. These plants were dug up from substantial populations in other parts of Palmer Woods and planted to help establish new populations in the fern garden.
4. Infrastructure Manager Chad Jordan, Becky Hill, and Land Steward Emily Douglas getting ready to paddle the Cedar River and survey for wildlife. On this trip they spotted seven spotted turtles!
5. Executive Director Tom Nelson led a hike at Kehl Lake Natural Area. Hike attendees were struck by the natural beauty of the woods while learning more about the plants and animals that find refuge here.
6. Stewardship staff got a tip that yellow flag iris was growing on a portion of Lime Lake's shoreline. Yellow flag iris is an invasive species in Michigan, known for degrading fish and bird habitat. Stew crew joined a wonderful volunteer (pictured) who helped them haul away the invasive by boat.





7. In May local Indigenous Knowledge Carriers, Tera John and Courtney Miller, led a hike at the Ingraham Preserve at the Cedar River Preserve. The preserve was the perfect spot to catch a rising moon.
8. Becky Hill showing docents some natural features to talk about on upcoming hikes. In the foreground is a blue flag iris.
9. Alicia Cooper and Tyler Lancaster hosted the Huron Pines AmeriCorps Trail Summit at Palmer Woods Forest Reserve. They gave their fellow AmeriCorps members a tour of the forest, led a trail clean up, and camped out at the forest. In the morning, Chad Jordan made everyone breakfast!
10. Alicia Cooper found this water lily at Shalda Creek.
11. Snapping turtles bask on logs to regulate their body temperature, soaking up sunlight to warm themselves after being in cooler waters. Basking helps them dry off and stay healthy by preventing skin infections that can occur in damp environments. This one was found basking at the edge of Lime Lake, where the stew crew affectionately named him Grandpa.



FARMERS BY BLOOD AND CHOICE: SUNBLOSSOM ORCHARDS FOREVER PROTECTED

*Jim and Toddy spent their careers immersed in the local farming community.
Now, their cherished orchards will be farmland forever.*



Jim Nugent and Toddy Rieger
enjoying a sunny day on their farm.

Photos in this story by Mark Smith.

Jim Nugent and Toddy Rieger are local icons in the farming community. Partners in farming and life, the pair recently protected their farm, Sunblossom Orchards, with a conservation easement. Protecting their farm was made possible in part by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through their Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

“We bought this farm in 1985 from the Mawby family, and our first season was ‘86,” said Jim. They grew tarts, sweets, apples, and peaches, making for a good, long season. Having grown up on a Benzie County farm, Jim always knew he would pursue farming. Jim and Toddy met while he was in grad school for entomology, and she was studying social work at Michigan State University. After marrying, Jim got a job as the MSU Extension County Director

in Leelanau 10 years before they bought Sunblossom.

Jim’s work with MSU Extension made him a friend to farmers. He spent his career working on issues that all farmers face, like invasive species, pests, and the effects of climate change. After serving as Leelanau County Director, he worked on protecting fruit in the fruit Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program, which expanded into a statewide initiative. Later, he became the District Horticulturist and Coordinator of the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station, continuing to help influence local agriculture and support farmers through research and education.

The farming community trusted Jim for his knowledge and dedication, especially because he owned and worked on his own farm.

“At the time, it wasn’t common for a woman to run the farm,” said Jim. It’s no secret that many farmers have to work full-time jobs in addition to managing their farm. For 17 years, while Jim worked at MSU Extension, Toddy ran the farm. She became a known and respected farmer within the community, eventually becoming the first woman to sit on the Soil Conservation District board (known now as the Leelanau Conservation District). “It was definitely a man’s world, shall we say?” she said.

Toddy remembers the early days and busy mornings when she had to make sure their three kids were fed breakfast and off to school before starting a full day’s work. As a first-generation farmer, there was much to learn. “There was certainly a learning curve those first few years. But I had support from Ed Mawby and learned a lot from him and, of course, from Jim.” But her full-time farming days are remembered fondly, especially memories of the people she got to know. “I really enjoyed the outdoor work. There were people who came to hand harvest every year, and I did not enjoy the harvest, but I enjoyed the people. You got to know some of them well because they returned every year.”

After Jim retired, he took over the management of the farm. But Toddy still gets her hands in the dirt. On a late August morning, she can be found canning a sizable haul of tomatoes from her personal garden. “Today, we only commercially grow sweet and tart cherries, so we no longer have a fall harvest, but it keeps us busy. We still have a few peach and apple trees just for us.”

The farmer’s plight is to be both a scientist and an economist. Jim and Toddy are aware of today’s farmers’ challenges. “It’s one thing to know the science, but it’s another thing to integrate the science well with the economics. You have to understand the biological aspect of it, but you still have to make money. It’s challenging to make a living in many areas of agriculture, but it’s particularly tough for smaller family farms. Growing up, my family supported six kids with their farm. We weren’t wealthy, but we weren’t poor either,” Jim lamented. Today, economies of scale and the effects of climate change (invasive species, changing weather) loom large as constant threats to family farms. Adding to that is the rising cost of land.

Protecting Sunblossom has always been a silently agreed upon future for the farm. “It was never a matter of if, only a matter of when,” said Toddy. “It was a very nice relationship working with the Conservancy to get this done.”

As farmers by blood and choice, Jim and Toddy are pleased to keep this farmland in the community forever.



KEEP LEELANAU WILD: SUPPORT THE KEHL LAKE EXPANSION

Imagine a place where ancient hemlocks and towering white pines stand guard over a peaceful wetland, where the call of migratory birds echoes across Lake Michigan's shoreline. This is the northern tip of the Leelanau Peninsula, a stunning 99-acre expanse adjacent to the Kehl Lake Natural Area. It is a haven for wildlife and an important part of the ecological world that helps sustain Leelanau's beauty and biodiversity.

Right now, we have a chance to expand Kehl Lake Natural Area by 99 acres, ensuring this sanctuary remains undisturbed. This addition will protect critical wetlands, diverse plant and animal life, and 338 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline. We need your help to make this vision a reality.

By contributing, you will be directly involved in protecting one of Leelanau's most cherished natural spaces. You will prevent harmful development and ensure that this remarkable area continues to thrive as a wildlife refuge and natural corridor.

This is a unique opportunity to make a lasting impact. Your support will grow the Kehl Lake Natural Area to 378 acres, enhancing the beauty and ecological health of Leelanau. Be a hero in this conservation story and help preserve this tip of the peninsula gem now and forever.



Photo by
Mark Smith



”Leelanau was such a big part of my mom’s life. She did Wildflower Rescue with the Conservancy for years and regularly went on docent hikes. My mom started what’s called a charitable remainder trust, about 15-20 years ago. One was fully designated to the Conservancy. In the last couple years of her life, she was surprised when she asked my sister where the values were. Of course, after years of not touching it, it grew substantially. My sister, Lisa, and I went to Kehl Lake and loved the walk to the platform surrounded by ferns, one of our mom’s favorite native plant species. My sisters and I know she would be happy seeing the lasting impact her donation is making.”

- Kate Vilter, daughter of Barbara W. Vilter, member of The Richard O. Ristine Heritage Society

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Leelanau
CONSERVANCY

Did you notice our new look? The updated logo should feel familiar, with a refreshed view. It both reflects our growth over 36 years and honors our valued history.

Our work remains the same - to protect the land, water, and scenic character of Leelanau County.

At the Leelanau Conservancy, we believe the outdoors is for everyone. We strive to honor and celebrate our community's diversity through our work. Our mission to conserve the lands and waters of Leelanau County can only be realized through a steadfast commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in conservation and stewardship and in our relationships and business practices. We recognize and celebrate that the well-being of nature and people cannot be separated. The Conservancy commits to including, supporting, valuing, and welcoming all people with whom we work and serve, now and in the future. By including all people in conservation regardless of culture, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, abilities, or age, we can help shape a more inclusive, more equitable, and more vibrant future for Leelanau.

