



the Meadowlark

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Fun Fact:

Orange, black and white are the colors of monarchs but did you know they’re also the colors of fritillary butterflies? Adults nectar on many of our native prairie flowers throughout the summer. Fritillary caterpillars are specialized; like the monarch caterpillar that needs milkweed, fritillary caterpillars need bird’s-foot violet as a host plant for food. Look for these floating beauties at all Belwin Conservancy sites.





A Vital Resource, Now and in the Future

IN THE PAST YEAR, many of us rediscovered how important natural areas are to our own well-being. While habitat restoration is focused on ecological health and sustainability, vibrant prairies and woodlands add to social and community vitality as well.

For 50 years, Belwin has nurtured a landscape of biodiversity shaped by community and opportunity. Now we're focused on deepening the public's experience of nature to awaken appreciation and shared responsibility for the natural world. We're setting the stage for another period of growth.

Our public trails have proved to be a vital resource that our community needs and values. In response to the increased use of our trails and interest in bringing groups to Belwin, we're restructuring our team to create a position focused on our public spaces. We expect our investment in staff to expand access, improve experiences, and prepare us for opening new hiking areas in the future.

For our visitors and the wildlife, we also focus on good habitat stewardship. Every acre of buckthorn removed means one more acre we commit to caring for perpetually. Grant funds allow us to do the most intense work of converting invasive-infested areas to open woodlands or grasslands; and when a grant is complete, donor support keeps us ready and able to take on the forever follow-up care. Each year brings more healthy habitat to share with our community.

As we mark 50 years, Belwin is beginning a new chapter. We have been seen as a "hidden gem," but we are letting go of that moniker and celebrating our progress toward an organization well-known for beautiful landscapes, expert conservation practices, expansive partnerships, and engaging programs that feature the arts, culture, and ecology.

Whatever your connection to Belwin, we appreciate your partnership in moving toward a future of healthy and shared wild places.



Katie Bloome

Katie Bloome

Executive Director, Belwin Conservancy

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SPOTTED IN THE WILD



Three generations gathered at the Belwin Education Center for an impromptu photo shoot. From left: Ibolya De Cardoza, Camilla Kuo-Dahab, Ayrton Zoltán, and Paloma Cardoza, Belwin Conservancy land and program assistant.



Belwin Conservancy Interpretive Naturalist Lynette Anderson and volunteers (from left) Madeleine Kerr, Neve Cabral, and Rob Cabral, plant shrubs along Valley Creek.

Cover photos: (clockwise, from top) From the Belwin archives, by Cathy Smith, and by Julia Schwab from Pixabay. This page: Photos by Amine Dahab and Connie Hess.



Land Protection Driven by Trust, Honesty, and Flexibility

By Greg Seitz, Belwin Conservancy Communications Partner

In 1990, Belwin Board Chair David Hartwell saw a For Sale sign on Stagecoach Trail and decided to make a phone call. That act resulted in Belwin purchasing 200 acres, now the core of our popular Stagecoach Prairie. The acquisition marked a turn toward land protection that continues today.

DAVID HARTWELL, the grandson of Belwin’s founders Charles and Lucy Bell, has personally guided almost every Belwin acquisition since 1990. In his view, Stagecoach Prairie was “undoubtedly” the most challenging acquisition in the organization’s history. Some of the land had been subdivided and there were environmental and safety issues. Furthermore, the seller had been involved in litigation about developing the property, and negotiations were complicated.

But Hartwell and Belwin persisted and succeeded in protecting a precious piece of the St. Croix Valley. Today, Stagecoach Prairie offers 4.5 miles of hiking trails through rich, diverse prairie and woodland—critical habitat for native plants and animals that lose more living space each year.

Over decades of land protection at Belwin, Hartwell says he’s learned honesty and trust are the most valuable parts of any deal. “Nothing compares to sitting down and working face to face and building trust,” says Hartwell.

“You are who you are, you’re honest, you deal with people honestly, you show up and answer questions.”

He also says every acquisition is unique, that there’s no template for purchasing a property. But it is always a partnership, which starts with conversations long before the property owner plans to sell.

Through this approach, Belwin has grown from 225 acres to over 1,500 acres today, protecting a diverse network of ecologically rich lands next door to a major metropolitan area. Such large, contiguous protected lands are critical to many species who need substantial tracts to survive and reproduce year after year.

A new tool for conservation

Today, Belwin continues working to protect more land, while also focusing on preventing development on its borders. This means using other methods than outright purchase to ensure surrounding lands remain in their natural state.

Conservation easements have been an increasingly important part of Belwin’s strategies. This essentially means landowners continue to own and use their property but see it protected—either by receiving compensation for the value of the conservation or through a charitable donation to Belwin of that value.

“Easements are a useful and flexible conservation tool,” says Katie Bloome, Belwin’s executive director. “And the easements will be there in perpetuity.”

Belwin currently holds easements on about 124 acres of surrounding land. Those legal rights mean the land can’t be subdivided or developed, and is maintained with healthy native vegetation.

“Another benefit to easements are the partnerships we form with the land owners,” says Bloome. “We can protect land forever, and work with the land owner so they know how to care for it. They remain day-to-day stewards of the land.”

Belwin supporters also play an important role in land acquisitions by supporting Belwin’s overall mission. There are times when Belwin protects land for a specific purpose and others where it adds to the overall natural area.

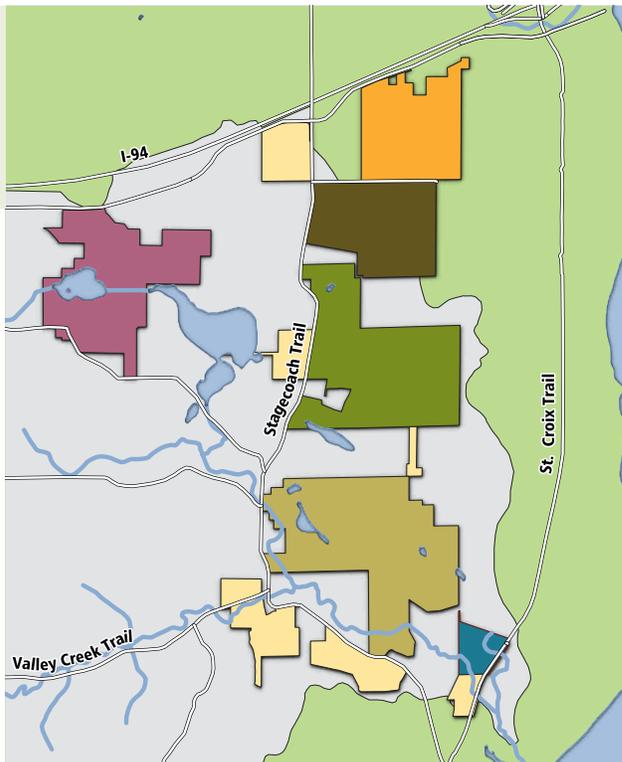
“We don’t always know what the land is going to be used for,” says Bloome, “we just know that it’s worth protecting.”

This article has been abridged for publication. Read the entire article online at belwin.org/2021/03/land-protection

Belwin Conservancy Land Protection

- Education Center (1970)
- Stagecoach Prairie (1990)
- Bison Prairie (1996)
- Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields (1996–1999)
- Creative Center (2006–2010)
- Future Public Hiking Area (2020)
- Other Belwin Lands
- Valley Creek Watershed

Note: Years show general time of acquisition. All parcels may not have been acquired in that year.



An Ambitious Conservation Goal

In response to a precipitous decline of wildlife and loss of public lands, an international push for conservation is taking shape. In the United States, it is gaining traction as “30 by 30,” a science-backed initiative to protect 30% of the nation’s land and water by 2030.

This idea isn’t new. “Years ago it was determined that we need to protect 30% to sustain the full array of biodiversity—below that, everything starts to collapse,” says Wayne Ostlie, Director of Land Protection at the Minnesota Land Trust.

Most experts agree the 30% goal is ambitious but attainable, and conservation by landowners like Belwin and other private citizens will be a critical piece of the puzzle.



Live from Belwin!

By Kate Seitz, *Belwin Conservancy Communications Partner*

FOR MOST OF 2020/2021, Saint Paul Public Schools students were learning remotely, using iPads to connect with their teachers and classmates. In-person field trips to Belwin Outdoor Science (BOS) were suspended.

Cathy Smith, BOS teacher on special assignment, ensured lessons could continue even if students couldn't be onsite.

"I made short videos to teach about the seasons, birds, beavers, and other phenomena," says Smith, whose special education students range from Pre-K to students in transition (18-21 years old). At their convenience, teachers played Smith's videos in tandem with books and other resources to offer the lesson.

Smith also joined classrooms live from Belwin, using her cell phone to connect with students from the prairie, stream, or forest. "Just as with all teachers, I did the best I could to provide learning for students during a really tough time," she says.



Cathy Smith's lesson on animals and adaptation asked students to predict which insulating material would best hold the heat of water in a test tube: feathers, fur, or a nest of leaves.

"The feedback from families and teachers was that the students enjoyed seeing the beauty of Belwin and having something different in their day."

This spring, students were able to return to BOS with only minor modifications: shorter time onsite, allowing students to return to their home school for lunch, and no classes offered during inclement weather to alleviate time indoors.

While she learned a lot through virtual teaching, Smith is grateful to be back onsite.

"Belwin is so important for many of the students I work with. When they step off the bus, the smiles are huge and there are calls of, 'I've been here before!' 'Are we going to touch a turtle today?' To see the faces of students who touch a big bluestem on the prairie or see a bluebird nest full of babies is truly an amazing thing."

Cathy's video lessons are available on her YouTube channel: [tinyurl.com/CathySmithBOS](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)



Bison Tower TLC

For nearly a decade, Belwin's Bison Tower has offered a glimpse at healthy habitat and sustainable agriculture in action.

Last winter, the Bison Tower got a refresh! The tower now boasts a wider staircase, reinforced railings and structural supports, and two levels of viewing platform.

Though the Bison Festival won't take place this year, the herd will be in residence from May to October. Come visit and witness how the bison bring our restored prairie to life, contributing to the biodiversity of this dynamic and beautiful habitat.

Thanks to our sponsors, Epic Provisions and Steve Smillie/Edina Realty, and several generous individual donors for supporting this project!

A New Community Connection

By Katie McNulty, FamilyMeans Director of Development & Communications

We recently formed a partnership with FamilyMeans in Stillwater, Minn., to help bring the natural world to people in the early stages of dementia. We are excited to see this partnership blossom in the coming months and years!

AS BELWIN CONSERVANCY CELEBRATES ITS HALF-CENTURY, FamilyMeans marks 35 years of its Caregiving & Aging program. Community Connections is one of its newest components.

FamilyMeans Dementia Coordinator Heidi Ricks (seen in photo, top), a Certified Occupational Therapist Assistant /Licensed (COTA/L), and Belwin Conservancy Interpretive Naturalist Lynette Anderson recently co-hosted a series of hour-long virtual sessions to give participants with early dementia a front-screen view of the wonders of Belwin's wild landscape.

During a virtual nature hike, "the group was amazed to see the changes we filmed, from falling snow to thawing at a Belwin pond. They were engaged to ask questions and the props shown online by Lynette really enhanced the session," says Ricks.

Community Connections (CC) is part of dementia empowerment services for people with an early-stage or

memory loss diagnosis. The service helps them link with others and explore new topics. Other CC classes have explored State Fair foods, songwriting with Ann Reed, local history in partnership with the Washington County Historic Courthouse, and poetry writing with Compas artist Zoe Bird. Soon there will be an intergenerational session with youth.

The CC service also helps to increase awareness of dementia, reduce stigmas, and build broader empathy. Plus, while CC participants are engaged in meaningful programming, their caregivers are given a break.

After this first successful series of classes, we hope to continue to share the seasonal changes at Belwin with our dementia participants either online or in person.

Founded in 1963, FamilyMeans offers caregiving services, clinical and school-based mental health, debt repayment, and youth development (in Cimarron and Landfall). Learn more at FamilyMeans.org



Web of Life, Restored

By Lynette Anderson, Belwin Conservancy Interpretive Naturalist

PICTURE ROWS OF MATURE CORN, wind ruffling the leaves of soybeans, and the moos of cattle in the low areas more suited to grazing. On many of the slopes, red pines and black locust trees would be growing, planted to combat soil erosion from the farming practices of the 1930s.

Roughly 30 years ago, this was the landscape of Stagecoach Prairie; a stark contrast to what it is today—a flourishing 280-acre habitat for native creatures.

In the early 1990s, Belwin acquired this injured land. Since then, we've made an intentional effort to restore it to the way it was before approximately 1850. As a result of our efforts, Stagecoach Prairie is now home to many species of prairie birds, like the Henslow's sparrow—which cannot exist without the prairie habitat—as well as myriad insects, reptiles, and small mammals. The web of life has been restored and we are richer for it.





Event Highlights

SUMMER SATURDAYS AT THE EDUCATION CENTER

Saturdays, May 29 – September 4
8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Every Saturday from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend, venture through woodland, prairie and wetlands at the Belwin Education Center. Face masks are required to enter the building, which will be open for check in, directions and restrooms. 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton. Free and open to everyone.

SATURDAYS ON THE SAVANNA

Saturday, June 5 & Saturday, June 12

Belwin’s donors and volunteers helped us persevere—and even thrive—through a very challenging year. To say thanks, we’re once again opening Belwin’s Creative Center for two Saturdays of hiking. This time, you and your guests will experience late spring/early summer on the sloping trails of this beautifully restored 160-acre parcel. 795 Indian Trail S., Afton. By invitation.

MUSIC IN THE TREES >>

Saturday, August 14 – Sunday, August 15

We’re bringing back this magical event! With adaptations for COVID-19, audiences will enjoy artist performances in the trees near Belwin’s Education Center. 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton. \$10/car. Open to everyone.

NIGHT IN NATURE

Thursday, September 23

Save the Date for a Night in Nature at Belwin’s Education Center. 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton. By invitation.

50TH CELEBRATION OPEN HOUSE

Saturday, October 9

Join us for our 50th anniversary celebration at sites across Belwin. Free and open to everyone.



Upcoming Events

May 12	Early Morning Bird Hike
May 27	Red Cross Blood Drive
June 5	Saturdays on the Savanna
June 12	Saturdays on the Savanna
June 22	Landscaping with Birds in Mind
August 5	Take a Walk on the Wild Side – Native Prairie Plants
August 14	Music in the Trees
August 15	Music in the Trees
September 23	Night in Nature
October 9	50th Anniversary Open House

Belwin Conservancy Board of Directors

David Hartwell, President

Doug Johnson, Vice President

Jill Koosmann, Treasurer

John Satorius, Secretary

Jerry Allan

Cindy Gehrig

Kris Hansen

Jessica Manivasager

Irene Qualters

Please check our website for the latest COVID safety guidelines and a complete list of upcoming events: belwin.org/events



Protected in Partnership

By Kate Seitz, *Belwin Conservancy Communications Partner*

AFTON RESIDENTS PAM NEARY AND COURT STOREY want to ensure the place they have called home for 35 years remains pristine for future generations. Working with Belwin to create a conservation easement has given them peace of mind—and a partner to help them protect their land in perpetuity.

Belwin: What's special about your land?

Court and Pam: We are blessed and privileged to have lived and raised our family on this special piece of land, which is situated on a peninsula at the northwest corner of Lake Edith. The inlet to Lake Edith is a stream, which trickles down from the west, wraps around our west and north shores, and moves into Lake Edith at a pace sufficient to provide open water virtually all year long. Especially during winter months, the open water provides a favorite refuge and resting place for all types of waterfowl. This place is a perfect combination of quiet and beauty with an untouched oak savanna, a stream and lake, and beautiful vistas in all directions. Lake Edith forms our east boundary and we are adjacent to Belwin on the north and west.



Belwin: What inspired you to donate a conservation easement?

Court and Pam: It was love at first sight when we saw this special place back in 1986. Our appreciation of the ecosystems and the unique, pristine nature of the land and water has only grown over the years. We came to realize that the best thing we could do would be to conserve this land for a wildlife corridor and the scenic value while we still could, by partnering with Belwin to keep it as close as possible to the way we found it. A conservation easement does just that.

Belwin: Describe your experience working with Belwin.

Court and Pam: We weren't long into the conservation process when we discovered that the values of the leadership and staff at Belwin were totally in sync with our own values. That made conserving our land so easy—a win-win for all of us.

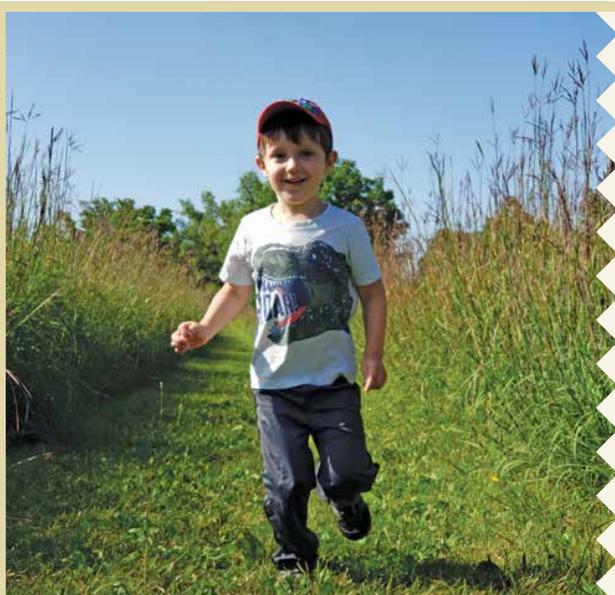
Belwin: Do you have any advice for others considering a conservation easement?

Court and Pam: We would encourage other like-minded property owners to partner with Belwin and/or have a friendly conversation with them about how it might work in your particular situation. We are happy with and quite proud of our outcome!

Supporting More Visitors to Belwin

Did you know? Each week in the summer Belwin personnel spends approximately 24 hours mowing trails. That's a lot of grass cutting! You can assist us with that monumental task. Our hand-me-down mower's days are numbered but, **with your help, we'll raise \$20,000 to purchase a replacement mower this summer.** And, if your generosity propels us beyond that to a **stretch goal of \$30,000**, we'll also be able to purchase an **ATV for a new staff person devoted to our public spaces.** It's all about maintaining trails and ensuring they stay open and safe for you!

Learn more at belwin.org/donate





BELWIN CONSERVANCY

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Afton, Minnesota 55001-9703
P: (651) 436-5189 F: (651) 436-2899
belwin.org

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U.S. Postage
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Inspiring through Nature

The mission of Belwin Conservancy is inspiring connection and engagement with the natural world.



50 Years of Memories



IN CELEBRATION OF OUR 50TH ANNIVERSARY, we are collecting stories and images in order to document the important role that Belwin has played in so many people's lives.

Whether Belwin has been your place to hike the trails, star gaze, bird watch, listen to music, create art, watch bison, cheer for young athletes, or all of the above, we want to hear from you. Contributors will be entered into a drawing for a private bison buggy ride!

For details, visit

belwin.org/about/celebrating-50

Did You Miss It?

If you didn't get a chance to experience "Belwin Conservancy at 50: A Love Affair with Nature," our anniversary show at The Phipps Center for the Arts, you can take a virtual walk-through at belwin.org/about/celebrating-50



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