



MEADOWLARK

A PUBLICATION FROM BELWIN CONSERVANCY



Spring/Summer 2023



Hitting the Trail

If you've ever been on a spring hike at Belwin, you know the path can sometimes be muddy, but the journey is always worth it. One of the most rewarding hikes I've taken was as a junior camp counselor. I was a shy teenager then, always trying to blend into the background.

That afternoon, I was assigned to go on an 8-mile trek to Ole Lake; just me, Jake the counselor, and a group of campers. I had never been before and it was one of the furthest hikes from camp.

That day, Jake led us through a pristine boreal forest, over a beaver dam, and along the edge of a marsh. When we arrived at Ole Lake, we stopped to rest by the calm, clear water.

It was there that Jake turned and asked me, "Why don't you lead us back?" I was shocked. Did he really think I could lead the group back on a trail I had never traveled before? With the encouragement of Jake and a few campers, I tightened my backpack and started down the path.

At each trail junction, I nervously checked the map. I was tense and focused but bolstered by the happy chatter of my companions. When we finally arrived, I got a round of high-fives and a look of approval from Jake.

This hike was 25 years ago, and I still remember it. The support I felt, as I was pushed out of my comfort zone, made this unforgettable.

Supportive communities like this exist all around Belwin. They are shaped by our staff, volunteers, partners, and visitors. We can be surprised by the bonds we form, but our community is made strong by our values and shared love of nature. As one volunteer told me, "I came for the nature, and stayed for the people."



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SPOTTED IN THE WILD



Credit: Jenny Hanlon

Children enjoy outdoor hikes led by Jenny Hanlon, M.Ed. (Child & Family Educator, Stillwater Area Schools) during Midwinter Family Fun in February.

Last year, Belwin volunteers photographed Gumby in several places around Belwin. Here he is holding some black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*)



Credit: Nancy Klingner



Strength in Diversity

How Belwin Restores Plant Communities

If you go out to Stagecoach Prairie this spring, you will not find a tidy prairie. You may even find it a bit unruly. With several different species coexisting and growing over each other, the prairies can seem almost disordered.

But this is exactly the point. “We try hard to create randomness and disjointed aspects to our habitats,” says Justin Sykora, Operations Director at Belwin, “because that’s what nature does.”

This is reflected in Belwin’s work. From the annual burns, which replicate naturally occurring fires, to diverse seasonal plantings, the idea is to meet the prairies as they are, with all their abundance and livelihood intact.

Planting for Resilience

When Belwin land staff begin restoring a site, the first step is always the same. “We walk it,” says naturalist Lynette Anderson. “We look at the site as a whole, taking note of what’s native and what’s invasive.” After that, land staff make sure to plant a variety of species. Anderson puts it simply, “Diversity yields resilience.”

For example, land staff might plant purple prairie clover and bergamot at a site. That way, Anderson explains, “if the clover is doing worse one year, the butterflies will still have bergamot to rely on...and the next year when the clover is back, the butterflies can rely on that.” With healthy plants and insects comes healthy prey and healthy predators.

Ultimately, it’s not about managing for a single plant or animal’s success. It’s about managing for the success of the entire ecosystem to create a healthy, self-sustaining community.



FUN FACT

Bumble Bees

One of the familiar sounds of summer is the pleasant bzzzz of our native bumble bees. These smartly attired insects are essential for the pollination of flowers, trees, and food crops.

DID YOU KNOW:

- Bumble bees are social insects that live in colonies with 50-500 members.
- Each colony member has a specific job that supports the whole colony.
- Many bumble bees’ nests are located underground in old rodent nests or above ground in tufts of grass, or under a rock or brush pile.
- Bumble bees are facing population decline.

YOU CAN HELP!

- Plant early and late blooming flowers.
- Leave some part of your yard wild.
- Specifically leave some bare, open ground.



It Starts with the Student

The Magic of Belwin's Adaptive Education Program

Followers of Belwin may be familiar with our Saint Paul Public Schools partnership, where each day elementary students come to the Hilltop Classroom for outdoor education. However, what is less well known is Belwin's one-of-a-kind program for students with special needs.

This is the Saint Paul Public Schools adaptive outdoor education program, led by special education instructor, Cathy Smith. Smith works with students who range widely in ages and needs. Whether a student is pre-k or 21, or whether they require a wheelchair or have a behavioral diagnosis, the same is true to Smith: the students' needs come first.

On certain days, Smith might help students construct a quinzee shelter in the snow, or use kicksleds for the first time. On another day, a student in a wheelchair might use the paved trails to navigate the wetlands. "Belwin gives my physically impaired students the opportunity to actually explore nature, in nature" says Andrea Smith, teacher at Bridgeview School. "There are not many other trips or activities that are made for my students."



Photo courtesy of Belwin Outdoor Science

"The work Cathy does is magical," says Josh Leonard, Education Director of Belwin Outdoor Science. "She really sees the individual."

Prior to Smith, this program was led by Jim Rue. "I often called it the perfect classroom," says Rue. "I saw kids gain confidence. I saw them go from an attitude of fear to an attitude of excitement."

That excitement continues to this day, as new students explore the outdoors in a program catered to their needs. As Cathy Smith puts it, "every kid needs to have the right thing for them."

Prairie Song

Spring is here. And with spring, comes the natural chatter of wildlife. With shrikes singing and dragonflies buzzing, Belwin is overflowing with music.

Joining this music is a cohort from the American Composers Forum and the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music. This April, Belwin will host a weeklong residency for the group, which includes four composers, three performer-mentors, and more.

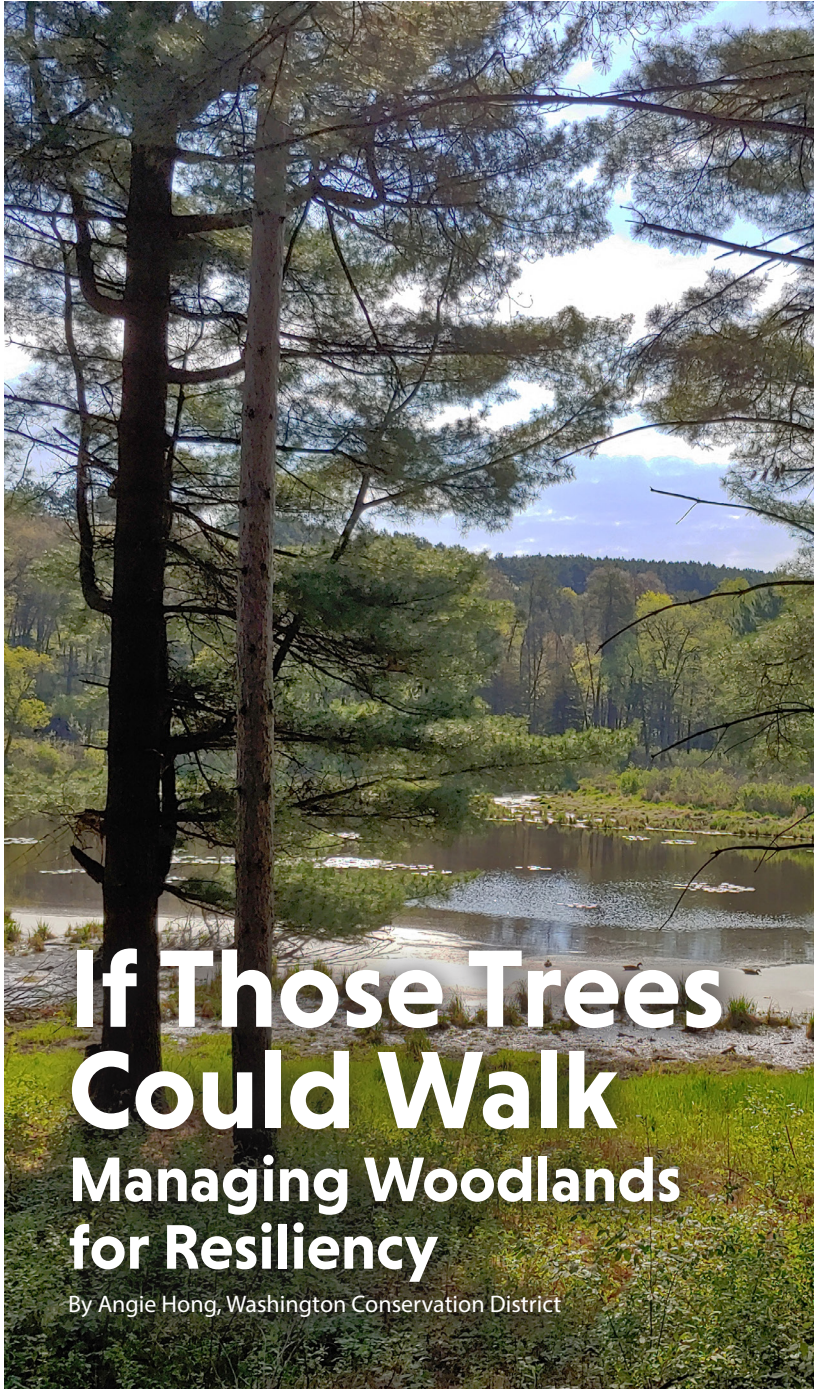
With the organizations' focus on climate citizenship, Belwin's active restorations and natural scenery will be a perfect fit for these artists.



"We are thrilled to have these like-minded composers, musicians, and organizations at Belwin. It is the perfect site to experience these wild spaces: prairie, wetlands, and oak savanna."

Susan Haugh, Program Director at Belwin Conservancy

Photo courtesy of the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music (2022 cohort)



If Those Trees Could Walk Managing Woodlands for Resiliency

By Angie Hong, Washington Conservation District

Deep in the heart of Ecuador's Sumaco Biosphere Reserve, the trees are walking – very, very slowly. In pursuit of better living conditions, the trees grow new roots that stretch across the forest floor and gradually pull the rest of the tree behind. These so-called walking palms can travel as far as 65 feet over time.

Here in Minnesota, many of our beloved tree species are on the move as well. As Minnesota's climate becomes warmer and wetter, maple are migrating further north, while aspen and tamarack are disappearing altogether. In our local area, we also see impacts from invasive species such as buckthorn, garlic mustard, and emerald ash borer, as well as tree diseases and habitat fragmentation.

This summer, Belwin and the Washington Conservation District will co-host a **free workshop for woodland landowners on Tuesday, June 6, 6-8 pm**, at the Education Site (1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton). Take a hike to practice identifying trees and learn strategies for building resiliency in your woods.

Register at belwin.org/events

The WCD also offers free site visits for county residents – www.mnwcd.org to sign up.

Give Back From the Trail

Peace, inspiration, adventure, rest, knowledge. Nature gives us so much; this year, while you're out in it, consider giving something back. In 2023, any gift you give from Belwin's trails or events will be matched by an anonymous donor. Look for special signage at our trailheads and event tables to give online, OR take an envelope from the kiosk and mail it back in.

Give back to the land on the land and see your giving double!





BELWIN BISON FESTIVAL

May 20, 2023

9:00 AM 5k “Run with the Bison” Fun Run Check in
12:00 PM Bison Release
10:00 AM – 2:00 PM Festival

This beloved annual event features the release of the 2023 NorthStar Bison herd onto Belwin’s Bison Prairie. In addition to the release, visitors can also enjoy fun activities for all ages, such as eco-arts, food trucks, and live music with a special performance by One Voice Mixed Chorus. Prior to the release, we’ll also host a 5k “Run with the Bison” Fun Run so visitors can run through the Bison Prairie before the festival begins.

Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields, 15601 Hudson Road N., Lakeland, MN, 55082. \$10 per car. Separate fee for runners.



MUSIC IN THE TREES

August 19 & 20, 2023 | 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM

A diverse group of instrumentalists and vocalists will perform from up in the trees at this two-day outdoor event. Both days will feature musicians collaborating and improvising. A fully accessible hour-long performance will be held during the final hour each day. This is a one-of-a-kind event!

Belwin’s Education Site, 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton, MN, 55001. \$10 per car.

NIGHT IN NATURE

September 14, 2023 | 6:30 – 9:00 PM

Save the date for a Night in Nature at Belwin’s Hilltop Classroom, Belwin’s annual donor appreciation event.

Belwin’s Education Site, 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton, MN, 55001. Invitation only.



Special thanks to our Blazing Star Presenter, Steve Smillie - Edina Realty, for his sponsorship of events this season.

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 10	Frog Walk at Oxbow Trails
May 20	Belwin Bison Festival
June 3*	Morning Wetland Walk
June 6	Managing Woodlands for Resiliency
June 15	Oxbow Trails Opening Day
June 17	Women Walking
July 29*	Amphibians and Reptiles of Minnesota
Aug 1	FamilyMeans Nature Memories Open House
Aug 16*	Walk on the Wildside
Aug 19 & 20	Music in the Trees
Sept 14	Night in Nature
Sept 9	Women Walking

Please visit our website for complete event details: belwin.org/events

*Presented in Partnership with Saint Paul Community Education.

Photos: Page 6, courtesy of Don Wendel and Nancy Klinger. Page 7, courtesy of Connie Hess, Jean and Hugh Huelster, and Mark O’Neil



A Wealth of People Power

Since 2018, Belwin volunteers have quadrupled! Thanks to this people power, Belwin is healthier and stronger. To lead the growing program, three coordinator roles were created in 2023, all filled by volunteers. Meet our team:



Jenny Buckland
Land Volunteer Coordinator

“I love that Belwin makes helping native habitats so accessible. I feel like I can contribute even though I don’t have specific naturalist skills – and that gives me hope in our ability to protect precious plant and animal species!”



Jean and Hugh Huelster
Event Volunteer Coordinators

“Our grandchildren know the trails better than we do. They feel ownership when we explore the trails. Belwin offers gifts of calmness and connection with nature, allowing us to know that we are one with all that surrounds us. We leave feeling peaceful.”



Nancy Klinger
Volunteer Intake Coordinator

“I spent time hiking at Belwin when my kids were young and made a point to come back and look at volunteer opportunities when I retired. I’m so happy to help support a healthy and sustainable future for this beautiful land for people to enjoy.”

Interested in volunteering at Belwin? Email Nancy Klinger at volunteers@belwin.org or visit belwin.org/involved/volunteer.

The Wait is Over!

Oxbow Trails will be open, dawn to dusk, starting June 15th. Belwin’s newest trail system features 1.25 miles of chipped trails along a wooded ridge, shaded areas, and Valley Creek. Come explore this collaboration between Belwin, Washington County, and the City of Afton.



Tired of trudging?

Ever wished Stagecoach Prairie was groomed in the winter? Consider making a special donation for Belwin’s 2023 fund-a-need! We need to raise \$40,000 this summer to purchase a tracked ATV and trail groomer to replace our trusty old 1980s snowmobile. (While this de-facto “groomer” has kept the Education Site’s trails open for Saint Paul Public School students for decades, it’s ready to be retired, and was never meant to maintain public trails.)

With these new tools at our disposal, we will improve winter access for the public with groomed trails at our public hiking areas, and ensure Belwin staff and partners can access all of Belwin in any season.

Learn more and donate at belwin.org/donate.



The Land We Are On

The land on which Belwin Conservancy exists is the ancestral home of the Wahpekute Dakota people, original stewards of this region. We recognize that despite government efforts to exterminate and diminish the Dakota, their connection to this land and water and their history and lifeways perseveres today. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. To read more, visit belwin.org/the-land-we-are-on/



BELWIN

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Inspiring through NATURE

Belwin Conservancy inspires connection
and engagement with the natural world.

Stay connected with Belwin online!



BELWIN BISON FESTIVAL



May 20, 2023
10 am - 2 pm

Fun Run Check-in at 9 am
Bison Release at 12 pm

\$10 per car (cash or check)
separate fee for 5K

Sponsored by:



Cover photo courtesy of Connie Hess. Back cover photos courtesy of Sharon Sylkoira