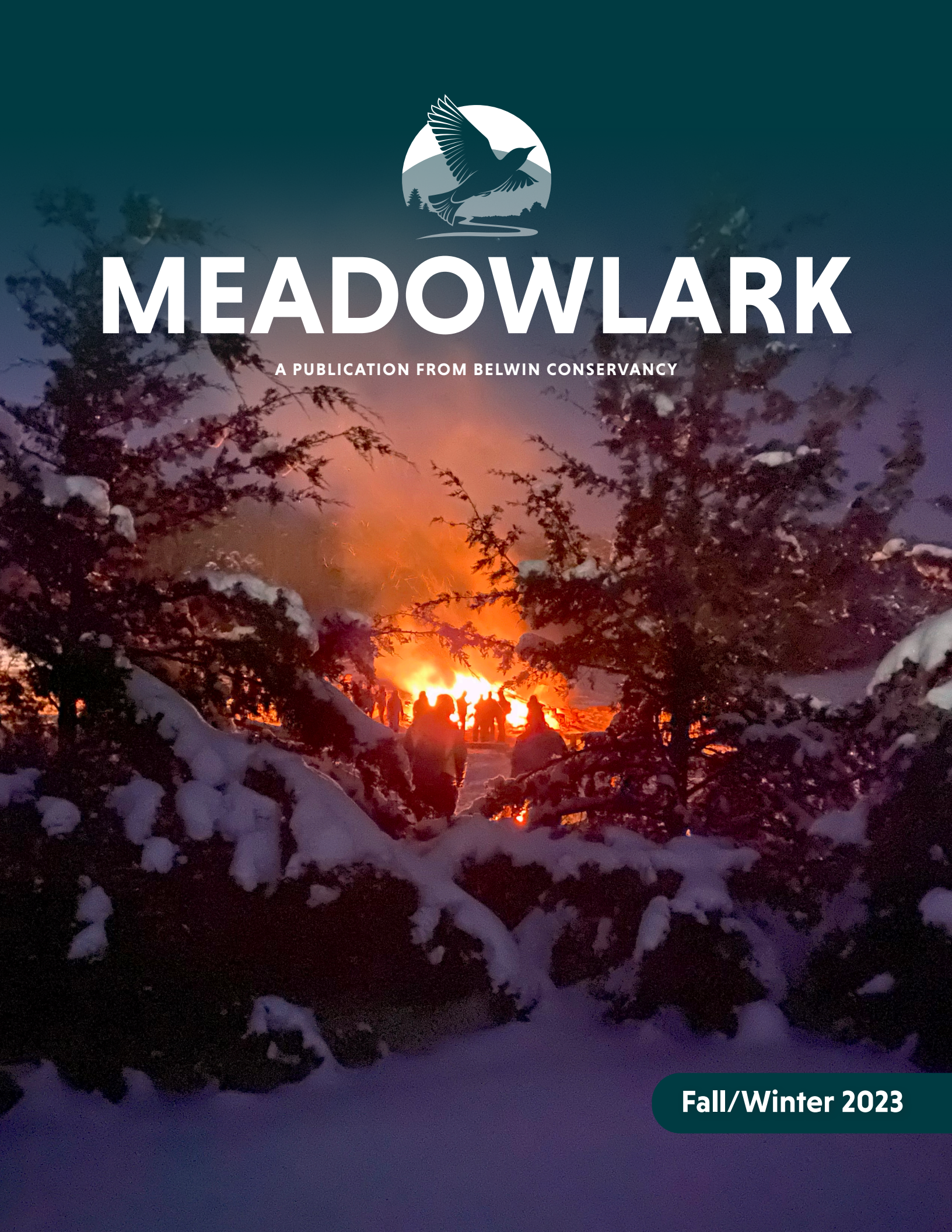




MEADOWLARK

A PUBLICATION FROM BELWIN CONSERVANCY



Fall/Winter 2023



Forest Time

When I'm in my office, I'm often moving fast – completing daily to-dos, planning weekly check-ins, or reviewing monthly financials. Yet when I take a moment to step out onto the trail under the canopy of trees, the world slows. I'm reminded of something a board member said to me during my first few months at Belwin: "We think in forest time. Things don't have to happen fast here."

I recently looked in on the eco-patches planted at the Hilltop Classroom. The growth of the small white pine trees is both noticeable and minute compared to the towering red pines they're slated to replace. Each winter, as we remove more diseased red pines, we put our hope for this forest on the fate of those young white pines. We plant them knowing that in a decade or two they'll become the healthy, thriving forest we need.

Some changes can take place quickly. A three-year cycle of restoration can completely transform a woodland understory from a buckthorn-choked landscape to one with room for new saplings. A single prescribed burn can help a prairie flourish with native plants. But the growth of a forest is different. It takes longevity, patience, and endurance.

When I think about Belwin, those words fit. It's taken decades to build an organization with 1,500 acres of protected land, partnerships that bring thousands of people to explore each day, and a community that supports it all.

The slow and deliberate pace is a stark contrast to the bustling day-to-day life many of us experience. It's one of the things that draws me out into nature, and that initially drew me to Belwin. Whenever I get caught up in the urgency of today or tomorrow, I know I can take a step into the woods to gain perspective. The forest is on a different timeline, and perhaps we can all slow down a bit too.



Katie Bloome

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Fox Snake!

Our land staff spotted this fox snake (*Pantherophis vulpinus*) in the trees this last summer.



Oxbow Trails

Oxbow Trails ribbon cutting ceremony, featuring (from left to right) Justin Sykora (Belwin Operations Director), Kevin Corbid (Washington County Administrator), Ron Moore (Afton City Administrator), Michelle Clasen (Washington County Commissioner), Randy Nelson (Afton City Council member), David Hartwell (Belwin Board President), Bill Palmquist (Afton Mayor), Haley Kutzler (Belwin Land Use Coordinator).



For Everything, A Season

A Year of Restoration at Belwin

As winter approaches, it can be easy to imagine that Belwin will be entering a slow period. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. Keeping Belwin's restored land healthy is a year-round endeavor, with different tasks appropriate for each time of year.

"There aren't slow times at Belwin," says Justin Sykora, Operations Director, "Just different times." Each season means a new phase of life and a new phase of restoration for the land. Today, we'll take you through an average year of land restoration at Belwin.

FALL

With plants going dormant at a staggered pace, fall is the perfect time to target invasive species. As Sykora puts it, "You can selectively remove one plant species without harming another." Fall is also an ideal time to collect seeds, a project which Lynette Anderson, Interpretive Naturalist/Restoration Specialist, spearheads with a group of knowledgeable volunteers.



WINTER

With the woodlands dormant, winter is the ideal time to remove diseased trees. The threat of spreading disease is minimal and, since the ground is frozen, cleared trees can be dragged without disturbing soil. This coming winter, Belwin staff will be focusing on clearing buckthorn and other invasives from Valley Creek Bluff.



SPRING

Springtime at Belwin means one thing: burn season. Prairie ecosystems are naturally fire dependent and, in the absence of naturally occurring fires, Belwin conducts controlled burns to maintain healthy prairie habitats throughout the year, but especially in the spring. This leads to healthier prairies year-round.

SUMMER

And what about summer? "Summer is everything else," Sykora says. "It's really all hands on deck." Work includes pulling invasives as well as herbicide treatment to interrupt seed production. Summer seasonal staff are a great help this time of year, assisting with all aspects of restoration.



FUN FACT

Oak Trees

Oak trees are a keystone species, which means they provide food and habitat for an entire ecosystem, supporting over 2,000 species of birds, mammals, and fungi. It takes 20 years for an oak to begin producing acorns! Peak production happens from about 50-80 years. An oak tree can produce up to 10 million acorns during its long life, but only 1 in 10,000 acorns will become an oak tree.

Image courtesy of Ryan Rogers



Restoring Land, Reviving Heritage:

How New Funding Could Expand a Key Partnership



Educator Ozuya Crow leads students in a bird count activity.

On a sunny day in June, a group of elementary students visited a protected woodland parcel at Belwin Conservancy. Led by Educator Ozuya Crow, the students participated in a bird count activity, where they learned traditional Lakota stories of prominent species throughout Minnesota, such as the bald eagle, robin, and red-tailed hawk.

This was one of many educational trips students at Anishinabe Academy, a preK-5th Minneapolis Public School focused on Dakota and Ojibwe culture and language, have taken to Belwin as part of an ongoing partnership since 2018.

This partnership provides students and educators with 19 acres of prairie, wetland, and woodland edge for outdoor environmental education, enhanced with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Next year, if phase two funding recommendations pass through the legislature and Governor, this partnership could receive \$668,000 to expand its success.

The partnership first received support in 2021 from the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR), which provides annual recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature on how to allocate proceeds from the state's Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. In July, LCCMR recommended funding for the second phase of this project.

Already, the partnership has connected many Anishinabe Academy students and their families to experts and elders teaching TEK firsthand at Belwin. Students assist with active restoration by removing buckthorn, pulling invasive plant species, and taking soil samples to prepare for a traditional garden.

Students have also received education from community members. This year, Elder Kevin Smokyday taught about the bison as



Anishinabe Academy student helping with the removal of invasive plants.

an ecological and cultural figure. In addition, Elder Hope Flanagan, Community Outreach and Culture Teacher at Dream of Wild Health, shared plant identification knowledge and traditional Ojibwe stories.

Parents and faculty have been enthusiastic about the partnership as it allows students access to traditional knowledge taught outdoors, which many Indigenous people have been historically denied in America.

“This partnership has been powerful in bringing together our students, staff and families into the beautiful

outdoor space to learn and engage in land restoration.” says Laura Sullivan, Administration Principal at Anishinabe Academy. “As Native American people we believe that we are a part of the land and our job is to take care of our plant, animal and water relatives in a good way.”

But there is still work to be done. With additional funding, the partnership can expand its scope to include other Indigenous-led organizations and partner schools, as well as alumni of Anishinabe Academy, who could then act as mentors to younger students.

“This expansion will allow us to honor the interconnectedness of the Indigenous community in Minneapolis and beyond as we incorporate more people in this work,” said Hannah Smith of Belwin, Program Coordinator for the Anishinabe Academy partnership.

The future is bright for this program and Belwin looks forward to seeing it come to fruition as it develops.

Funding for this project was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

Please thank your representative for making this support possible.



Anishinabe Academy students visiting the Bison Prairie.

Reclaiming Outdoor Spaces:

A New Partnership with Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery

Last June, Belwin Conservancy began a partnership with the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery (MAAHMG) for the 2023 Artist in Residency program. MAAHMG chose the artists and the parameters for their residency, selecting photographer Tomás Alvarez and multimedia artist Whitney Terrill. The artists spent the month of June at Belwin and gave a presentation at MAAHMG on August 10th reflecting on their experiences in nature.

“We believe nature belongs to everyone and we are seeking to change the narrative that Black people don’t do the outdoors,” stated Tina Burnside, co-founder and curator of MAAHMG. “We hope this residency will play a role in Blacks reclaiming outdoor spaces.”

This partnership between Belwin and MAAHMG will continue in the years to come, including an Artist Showcase slated for 2025.

To learn more about MAAHMG, visit maahmg.org.



(left to right), Susan Haugh (Program Director, Belwin), Tomás Alvarez (photographer, 2023 Artist in Residence), Whitney Terrill (multimedia artist, 2023 Artist in Residence), Tina Burnside (Co-founder, Curator and Development, MAAHMG), and Coventry Royster Cowens (Co-Founder, Museum Manager, MAAHMG). Photo courtesy of MAAHMG.



MAJOR EVENTS



WINTER SOLSTICE BONFIRE

Wednesday, December 20, 2023
6 – 9 PM

Join us for our annual solstice bonfire! Enjoy a roaring bonfire, cookies and hot cider in a warming tent. Night hikes will be available throughout the night, with live music starting at 7:00 pm.

*Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields,
15601 Hudson Road N., Lakeland, MN, 55082. \$10 per car.*



Image courtesy of Jenny Hanlon

MIDWINTER FAMILY FUN

Saturday, February 3, 2024
5 – 7 PM

View the stars and moon with Minnesota Astronomical Society members, take hikes for young people led by Jenny Hanlon of Stillwater Schools, and enjoy a campfire with s'mores.

*Hilltop Classroom and Joseph J. Casby Observatory
1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton, MN 55001.*

BELWIN BISON FESTIVAL

Saturday, May 18, 2024
9 AM 5k “Run with the Bison” Fun Run
10 AM – 2 PM Festival

Join us for this annual event, which includes live music, food trucks, a 5k fun run, and the release of the 2024 NorthStar Bison herd onto the Bison Prairie

*Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields,
15601 Hudson Road N., Lakeland, MN, 55082. \$10 per car.*



Image courtesy of AJ Photography LLC

UPCOMING EVENTS

Dec 9	Winter Twilight Hike
Dec 16	Women Walking
Dec 20	Winter Solstice Bonfire
Jan 13	Winter Twilight Hike
Feb 3	Midwinter Family Fun
Feb 4	Winter Wandering
March 16	Women Walking
April 22	Frog Walk at Oxbow Trails
April 27	Celebrating Your Wild Voice
May 18	Bison Festival

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

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/



What Makes Afton, Afton

An Interview with Steve Smillie

When we met with Steve Smillie to talk about conservation at the Education Site this summer, he was energized. Just hours before, he had been running the trails at Stagecoach Prairie, one of his favorite running spots. We had a conversation with the local real estate agent and longtime Belwin supporter about his work, his support, and what makes conservation so important.

What's your relationship with this area?

My family moved here when I was a kid in 1985. The house we lived in backed up to Belwin. Later, I moved away, had children, and ultimately came back. What I really like about living in Afton, and why I moved back, is because of how protected it still is. In many ways, it still feels how it did when I was a kid. Belwin has a lot to do with that, along with the City of Afton.

You and your wife, Erin Smillie, are big supporters of Belwin. What inspires that support?

When it comes to donations, the two things we value is our local setting and nature. Belwin wraps that up so

easily. We especially appreciate the long-term planning. Belwin isn't just planning for the next 50 years, but for the next 200.

Many in our community know you for your work as a realtor at Edina Realty. What appeals to you about that work?

Afton is such a unique and special place. It's great to help people move here. At other times, I'll have to help people who need to move away for one reason or another, but they're always grateful for the time they had here.

I understand you have a conservation easement on your home. Why is conservation important to you?

It's critical. It goes back to long-term planning. Conservation easements ensure protection of the land and water. It helps keep things the way they are. It's what makes Afton, Afton.

Belwin is grateful to Steve for sponsoring all our large public events in 2023. Join us for the final event of this season, the Winter Solstice Bonfire, on December 20th!



Powder Patrol is a Wrap!

Thanks to our incredible community, Belwin's trails are going to be a lot easier to access this winter. With your help, we surpassed our \$40,000 goal to equip Belwin with a tracked ATV and an accompanying snow groomer. Later this winter, we will begin grooming portions of Stagecoach and Tallgrass trails – watch your email for details!

Moreover, we can better service trails at the Education Site so children from Saint Paul Public Schools can explore winter woods and prairies with ease.

We are grateful to you – your support is making our work safer, more efficient, and more sustainable, one machine at a time.

give TO THE MAX 
Nov. 16, 2023

Belwin relies on your support to keep our restored habitats healthy and give everyone access to nature in all its splendor. Give to the Max Day is your chance to have a big impact on our work. An anonymous donor will match all gifts made from November 1 to 16, 2023. Join, renew, or give an additional gift and see your dollars doubled!

belwin.org/donate



BELWIN

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Inspiring through **NATURE**

Belwin Conservancy inspires connection
and engagement with the natural world.

Stay connected with Belwin online!   



WINTER SOLSTICE BONFIRE

Wednesday, Dec. 20 • 6 – 9 PM

Enjoy guided night hikes, warm cider and cookies,
and live music around the fire. **\$10 per car**

Sponsored by: 
 
stevesmillie@edinarealty.com

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