MEADOWLARK

A PUBLICATION FROM BELWIN CONSERVANCY

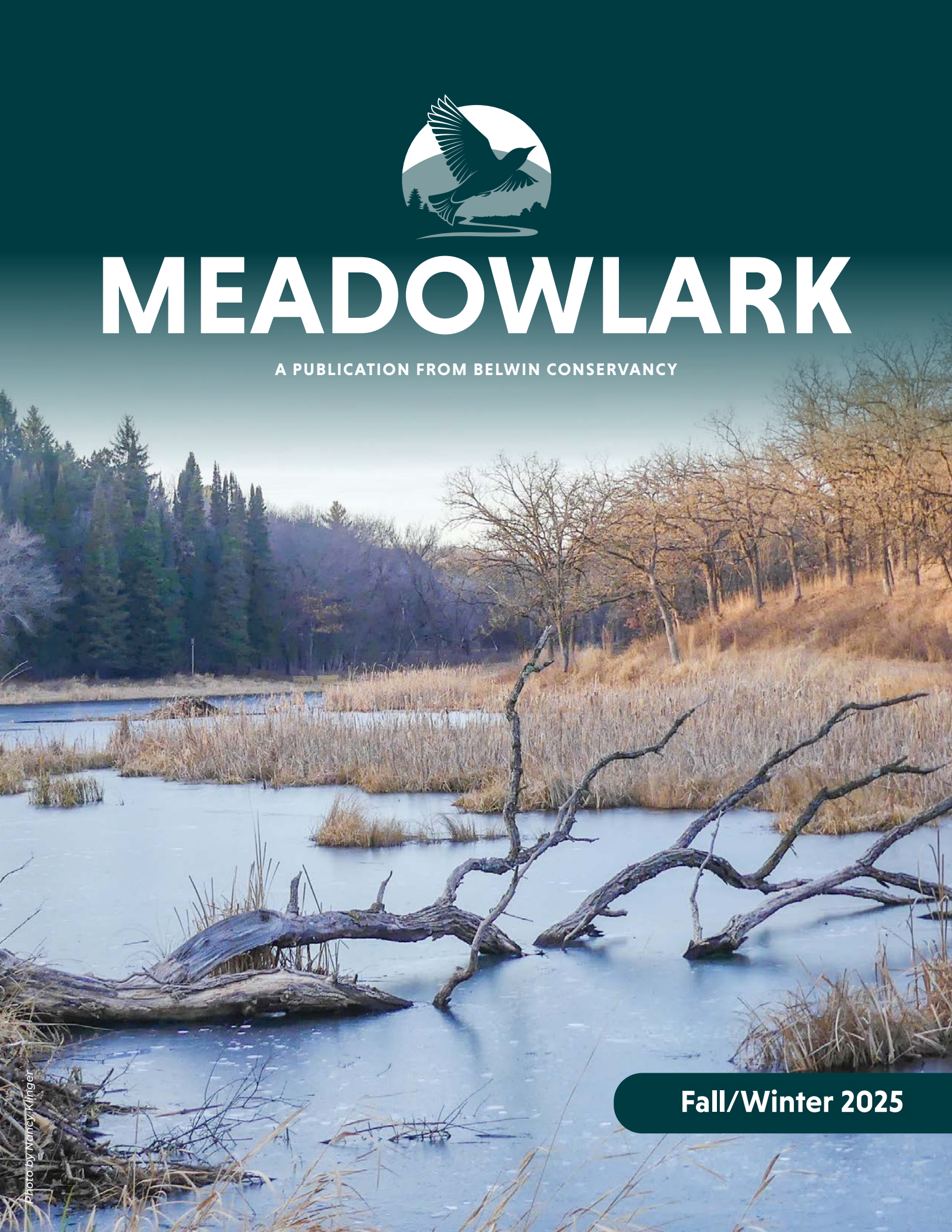

Photo by Nancy Klinger

Fall/Winter 2025

Immersion in Nature

This summer, we went canoe camping as a family for the first time. The lead-up to the trip was somewhat haphazard as we attempted to adjust our packing list, gear, and menu from our typical car camping to canoes. As I was buying poles to construct a car rack extension so we could fit two canoes on top of our vehicle, I had my doubts about whether all of this was worth the effort.

However, after we pushed off, leaving the boat ramp behind us, I felt a sense of excitement and presence of mind. It was worth it. Every moment of the next four days was spent surrounded by pine forest, clear lakes, and wildlife. The focus on what was immediately in front of us—loons, water, a hammock, family—was healing in a way I hadn't felt since my canoe camping trips as a young adult.

From what people tell me about their experiences at Belwin, I know it can be healing in a similar way. In contrast to a backyard or city park, at Belwin there are places where you can sit and see nothing but nature: waving prairie grasses, an oak stretching its branches, a swallow swooping and diving to catch insects.

To create that immersive experience can take a lot of work: the personal work of making time, finding a place, and getting yourself there; the programmatic work of busing in schoolchildren and designing curriculum; or the never-ending work of habitat restoration and care.

And it really is worth it. When all of those pieces come together, they open the door for someone to experience nature and form deep connections with the natural world. Those connection points can be as big as a canoe trip, or as simple as reading about Belwin in this newsletter. Together with your support we'll keep working to make it easier for everyone to have those experiences.

Katie Bloome

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SPOTTED IN THE WILD

Goats

This summer, a herd of goats moved into the Education Site. They have been busy munching away on 3.5 acres of buckthorn and other woody invasives. This helps thin out patches on some difficult-to-maintain slopes, making it easier for our land staff to continue management.

Limitless Cycling Partnership

In July, FamilyMeans' Nature Memories Open House invited individuals with memory loss to connect with nature at Belwin. Thanks to Limitless Cycling, Trackchairs were available at the event. In the words of Limitless Cycling, "Trackchairs transform what might have been 'you go ahead without me' into 'I wouldn't miss this for the world.'"

Photo courtesy of Limitless Cycling

SEASONAL KNOWLEDGE:

Lessons from Belwin's Summer Crew

By Adam Winer, Belwin Board Member

At Belwin, major restoration projects often begin with grant-funded contractors. But once that work is done, the long-term care of the land depends on a donor-supported seasonal crew. This summer, that team included Susan Amacher, Elise Dunne, Dave Freund, Sammy Doherty, and Sam Priebe. "We essentially double our team size every summer," says Natural Resources Director Cooper Crose. "Without our summer crew, we simply couldn't maintain our land in the long term."

Here are some lessons from the seasonal team:

Invasives Never Rest

With 1,600 acres to manage, Belwin tracks invasive "hotspots" on both a digital app and a giant dry-erase map on a wall at headquarters. They've been working to contain some invasive outbreaks for years. Others—like a first-ever spotting of small-leaf bramble last year—are able to be contained quickly before an initial outbreak becomes a full-scale infestation.

Every Week Is a Window

From garlic mustard in May to spotted knapweed in July, each invasive species has a critical window for treatment. The crew times their work with the bloom-to-seed cycle, which is often just weeks long. Treatments to stop seed production include some targeted herbicide application. They also spend many hard hours hand pulling, mowing, and brush-cutting invasives.

Fire Heals

Many of Minnesota's ecosystems evolved with fire. Each year, Belwin recreates that dynamic with dozens of controlled burns that suppress woody encroachment and remove old thatch. That requires lots of logistics: burn permits are precise—right down to wind direction and specific rules. For example, no smoke is allowed to go over I-94. Seasonal staff help with prepping burn breaks and protecting infrastructure such as fences and signs.

Boatload of talent: from left to right Elise, Dave, Sam, and Sammy.

Landscapes Don't Hold Still

Belwin's crew knows: restoration is never static. A prairie edge might slowly become savanna; a shaded grove might reopen into grassland. Shifts like these aren't failures—they're part of the land's natural rhythm. Stewardship means adjusting as things evolve, sometimes planting trees, sometimes removing them, always guided by the needs of the habitat.

Save the Buckthorn for Last

Each fall, a slimmed-down crew targets buckthorn when it's easiest to spot. Unlike most native plants, buckthorn stays green deep into October. By waiting until native foliage has gone dormant, the team can spray aggressively without harming other species.

Our Seed Has a Pedigree

Throughout the summer, the crew (along with volunteers) harvest prairie seeds by hand. These hand-collected seeds thrive better than seeds imported from elsewhere. That's because the local genotypes have had thousands of years to adapt to regional weather, soils, and insects on Belwin lands. These seeds are later used in restoration projects—ensuring we're not just keeping invasives out, but actively helping native plants return.

From managing invasive species and collecting native seed to conducting burns and restoring balance between prairie and forest, Belwin's seasonal crew is central to the ongoing health of this land. They are both stewards of change and also keepers of continuity. With your continued support, their work won't just preserve what we've restored—it will shape the next chapter of Belwin's living landscape.

Opening the Door to Wild Places

If you've ever driven past a stretch of prairie, woodland, or wetland and only later learned it belonged to Belwin, you're not alone. Across our eight public sites and program sites, entrances can be easy to miss. Kiosks vary from place to place, and arrival can feel abrupt—one moment you're on a county road, the next you're in a trailhead parking lot with little transition in between.

That's about to change. Belwin is embarking on a multiyear entrance renovation project designed to make every visitor's first impression welcoming, clear, and inspiring.

WHY IT MATTERS

Entrances are the first chapter in a visitor's Belwin experience. The design of these spaces shapes how people feel before they take a single step on the trail. "We want every visitor to feel a sense of belonging here, whether it's their first time or their hundredth," says Belwin Executive Director Katie Bloome. "Clearer entrances and wayfinding help open the door to that connection."

The project also addresses a long-standing challenge: a perception that Belwin is "closed" to the public. By creating inviting, easy-to-find entrances, we're making it clear that Belwin welcomes everyone to explore our trails and enjoy the wild beauty we protect.

WHAT'S CHANGING

For years, Belwin has addressed entrance and wayfinding challenges with small fixes and temporary signage. With the help of Urban Ecosystems, a St. Paul–based landscape architecture firm, we're now taking a holistic approach: a cohesive entrance concept that will be applied across all sites.

Their updates will be phased in over the coming years, with each site receiving tailored improvements to fit its unique character and landscape.

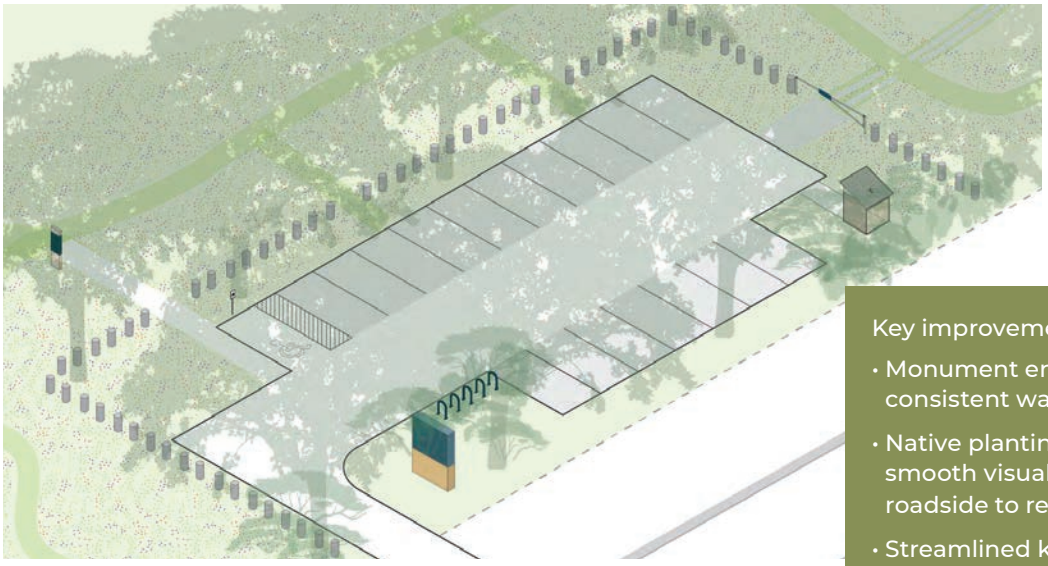
PART OF A LARGER VISION

The entrances project is one of six major initiatives in Inspiring Through Nature, a $10.2 million capital campaign to make Belwin's wild spaces more accessible and welcoming. Early campaign commitments made it possible to hire Urban Ecosystems and create the entrance concept, and campaign funds will bring the design to life in the years ahead.

You can help open the door to wild places. Contributions to Inspiring Through Nature support not only the entrances project, but also other vital initiatives that connect people to nature and protect the landscapes we all cherish.

Learn more and give at belwin.org/campaign

Rendering of new trail kiosks



Key improvements will include:

- Monument entrance signs and consistent wayfinding markers.
- Native plantings that create smooth visual transitions from roadside to restored ecosystems.
- Streamlined kiosks with clear, consistent, and easy-to-read information.

Designs for Belwin's public entrances, including the main lot at Stagecoach Prairie, above, ease transitions into restored ecosystems, creating a welcoming arrival experience and suggesting a clear destination.

Images courtesy of Urban Ecosystems

Open for Learning!

The Peter J. King Family Foundation Wetlands Center welcomed 22 students from Saint Paul's Humboldt High School on Wednesday, September 10. They were the first to kick off their field trip from the new building, which was completed this summer.

After a brief orientation, the students set off on a mile-long hike led by Christin Fleming, the SPPS teacher assigned to Belwin. Their mission: identify bugs for their Insect Bingo cards.

The hike took students, teachers, and aides along Bulrush Slough and Valley Creek, through oak savanna and pine forest. Many students walked on their own; some were pushed in joggers. Aides used sign language with students with hearing impairments.

Andrea West, Deaf/Hard of Hearing teacher at Humboldt, accompanied her students on the field trip.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Just to have this big building, logistically, is so great. We have tube feeding, we have toileting, we have wheelchairs. We've never had a big space like this for them to come experience it all together. It's kind of a dream come true."

In addition to offering better accommodations for students who have special needs, the new building is also creating space for students from other school districts. This fall, elementary students from Stillwater Area Public Schools will also begin coming to the new building for outdoor science education.

Learn more at belwin.org/inspire

Photo courtesy of Saint Paul Public Schools

Photo courtesy of Saint Paul Public Schools

FUN FACT

Photo Credit: Cephas, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Dark-eyed Junco

A harbinger of changing seasons, the arrival of the dark-eyed junco *(Junco hyemalis)* alerts us to the oncoming colder days of winter. This handsome little bird typically shows up in late October, migrating down from northern Canada to northern portions of the United States. They can be identified by their foraging behavior of hopping on the ground as they peck and scratch for seeds as well as their tendency to flit in low underbrush to find insects on twigs and leaves.

Throughout the winter months, they feed in mixed groups of birds along with Chickadees and Nuthatches. To pick them out of the flock, look for their rounded head, long tail, pale bill, and white outer tail feathers that are prominent when they fly up from the ground. As one of our winter neighborhood birds, look for them at a feeder near you!

EVENTS

NEW CLASS!

SAVING SPACE FOR WILDNESS IN YOUR YARD – THREE-PART SERIES

October 18, 2025; December 6, 2025; April 4, 2026

9 AM – 12 PM

Wild spaces are disappearing. Join us to learn some simple things you can do in your own backyard to change the paradigm of mowed lawns, one small corner at a time. *Cost: $10, $20, or $35 per person, per session.*

Belwin Education Site, 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton, MN 55001

NIGHT IN NATURE

Wednesday, October 22, 2025

6:30 PM – 9 PM

Save the date for our annual donor appreciation event. This year the event will take place at the new Peter J. King Family Foundation Wetlands Center. *Invitation only. RSVPs required.*

Belwin Education Site, 1553 Stagecoach Trail S., Afton 55001

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/*

MIDWINTER FAMILY FUN

Saturday, February 7, 2026

5 PM – 7 PM

View the stars and moon with the Minnesota Astronomical Society. Enjoy stories with Stillwater Schools Early Childhood Family Education, plus s'mores, night hikes, star activities, and campfires. *Cost: $0, $10, or $20.*

Belwin Education Site, 1553 Stagecoach Trail S, Afton, MN 55001

BELWIN BISON FESTIVAL

Saturday, May 16, 2026

10 AM – 2 PM
Festival & 5k

Fun activities for all ages. 5k Run with the bison, live music, eco-arts, food trucks, and the bison release. *Cost: $10, $20, or $35.*

Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields, 15601 Hudson Road N., Lakeland, MN, 55082

OTHER UPCOMING EVENTS

Nov 5	First Wednesday Walkabout
Dec 3	First Wednesday Walkabout
Dec 13	Women Walking
Dec 14	Twilight Hike
Jan 7	First Wednesday Walkabout
Feb 4	First Wednesday Walkabout
Feb 8	Winter Wandering
Mar 4	First Wednesday Walkabout
Mar 14	Nature Journaling: A Practice of Play
Mar 21	Women Walking
Apr 1	First Wednesday Walkabout
Apr 21	Frog Walk

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

A Vigil Over Valley Creek

About twice a month, a small team of volunteers wades into the cold, clear waters of Valley Creek. They carry meters and sample bottles, but their most important tool is patience. Their goal is simple yet vital: to keep watch over one of Minnesota's most pristine trout streams.

The team—Don Wendel, Dllona Clendenen, Jeffery Brenner, Lisa Peterson, Michael Ramsey, and Lauren O'Keefe—is part of a wetlands research group supported by grants from the Science Museum of Minnesota, the St. Croix Watershed Research Station, and others.

Water researchers prepare equipment along the bank of Valley Creek

Photo courtesy of Don Wendel

What They Measure and Why It Matters

Most of the testing happens right at the creek, where the team wades into the water to record temperature, flow rate, and other data. A few samples are brought back to Belwin's Savanna Center for additional analysis in the lab.

These measurements build a long-term record of the creek's conditions, helping detect changes that could signal problems from development or other human impacts. "It's important because we're creating a database against which we can measure any changes," says Don. "We're maintaining a vigil over the stream. All the data give us a personal association with the stream system."

Photo courtesy of Don Wendel

Valley Creek supports an abundance of aquatic life, including three species of trout. As Don notes, "It's an important habitat."

How Belwin Supports Their Work

Belwin provides the researchers with dedicated lab space at the Savanna Center—a major upgrade from the days when they worked out of their garages. "We're really grateful for that," says Don. "It's a really nice that allows for more rigorous control over our research protocols."

Belwin facilitates access to several sites along Valley Creek, including locations on the north and south branches and near its outlet into the St. Croix River. These varied sites give the research team multiple points of data. "With enough areas to monitor, we knew we had a viable experimental design," Don says.

Protecting and Honoring the Stream

For the team, the work is both scientific and personal. "We look at it as a way to raise people's consciousness about the water," Don says. "It's a way of honoring the stream—by studying it, getting to know it, what's in it, and how it lives. We still have more to learn."

Don also sees their work as a teaching opportunity. "What we do is a way of protecting and honoring the creek, and it's also a teaching opportunity."

To learn more or volunteer with the research team, contact Dllona Clendenen at dllonac@hotmail.com or Don Wendel at don.wendel@msn.com.

give TO THE MAX Nov. 20, 2025

Good work is happening all over Minnesota, and this fall is a great time to support the causes you love. Every gift to Belwin during Give to the Max will be doubled—thanks to an anonymous donor matching all gifts made from November 1 to 20, 2025. Join, renew, or give an additional gift this year and make a difference for the wild things in our region.

belwin.org/donate

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belwin.org

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Belwin Conservancy inspires connection and engagement with the natural world.

Stay connected with Belwin online!

We're almost there!

Four years ago, we began a $10.2 million drive to strengthen Belwin's future and make our land more accessible. So far, you have helped us:

- Build a new educational facility
- Protect an additional 135 acres
- Restore an additional 156 acres
- Open Oxbow Trails
- Renovate the Savanna Center
- Add $2 million to Belwin's endowment
- Create a plan for better entrances

With just $300,000 to raise before the end of this year, there is still work to be done, like improving parking and landscaping at the Savanna Center, paving trails, and making our entrances easier to navigate. Learn more and make a gift at **belwin.org/campaign**.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this historic moment!

INSPIRING THROUGH nature
A Campaign for Belwin

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