History of the Honey Creek Natural Area

The history of WSO's involvement with the property at Honey Creek is recounted by one of the area's most influential advocates.

by Harold G. Kruse

The Honey Creek valley, also known locally as Indian Trail valley or Born's valley, first came to the attention of WSO members on a memorable June bird walk during the 1956 summer campout in Sauk County. The 2½-mile trek down this beautiful valley, carpeted with early summer ferns and wildflowers, and alive with bird song, left an indelible memory in the minds of the participants.

Several years later, when the WSO board, under the urging of president Stanley Polacheck, decided to become involved in natural areas protection by establishing a WSO bird sanctuary, the Honey Creek valley was an easy first choice for such a project. Factors considered were the scenic beauty of the valley, the broad variety of native plant communities and bird habitat, and the accessibility to a majority of WSO members. Plant communities range from open water and cattail marsh through sedge meadows, alder thicket, tamarack and hardwood swamp, lowland hardwoods rich in wildflowers, hemlock cliffs, upland hardwoods, and dry hilltop "goat prairies." Over 500 species of native plants have been identified, and over 100 species of birds have been recorded as nesting in the area at some time during the past 30 years.

Land acquisition began in 1958 with the leasing of 30 acres from William Pagel. A fund-raising drive was organized, and the tract was purchased in 1960. This was followed shortly by purchase of 65 acres of bog and marsh from Oscar Rudolph and Leslie and William Pagel. In 1962 the 40-acre sandstone cliff and upland forest south of the bog were added. This tract has been used as a vulture nesting site, and also contains the state record large-toothed aspen tree, plus interesting orchids and other wildflowers.

At this time, the former Rudolph home at Honey Creek was purchased by David and Hazel Cox, WSO members from Beloit. The old farmhouse quickly became the headquarters for WSO members and friends visiting Honey Creek, and the Coxes proved to be gracious and considerate hosts through the 60's and early 70's. They, together with Edward Peartree of Oconomowoc, established the Honey Creek bird banding station, which has been in operation for
30 years, and is the subject of another article in this report.

In the 1970's memorial funds for David and Hazel Cox were used to construct the nature center building which houses items of local natural history, and provides a meeting place for visiting birders, botanists, and hikers. The building was designed by Harold Kruse and built by W. D. Brown, with stonework by Gary Werner, Donald Kindschi, and others. It is intended to represent the Baraboo Hills, with the chimney and north stonework of quartzite, grading to conglomerate, sandstones and limestone on the south end. The fireplace is built of rocks from throughout the United States, and donated by WSO members and friends. WSO visitors to the area are welcome to use the nature center grounds for overnight camping.

In 1964, UW Emeritus Professor Dr. Harry Steenbock donated money to buy the 85-acre Meyer woods north of the WSO property. This is now known as the Steenbock Woods, and includes the second hemlock cliff and the upland hardwood forest extending eastward to Highway PF. The woods is rich in fungi with over 40 species recorded on one September walk.

Following purchase of the Steenbock Woods, the John Muir Chapter of The Sierra Club began construction of a hiking trial intended to link Honey Creek and the various Nature Conservancy reserves eastward to Devil's Lake. The long trail was later abandoned because of concern that it would bring overuse to some of the more sensitive areas, but portions of the trail are still in use, as at Honey Creek, Hemlock Draw, and Baxter's Hollow.

The 40-acre Lucht tract west of the Steenbock Woods, and the 3-acre parcel north of the bridge on Sky View Road completed the early purchases, and brought the total acreage of the Honey Creek Natural Area to 270. An important priority for addition to the preserve is the sedge meadow east of the bog and south of Sky View Road. This meadow has been found to contain an endangered plant species, bog bluegrass (Poa paludigena). Finally, there are the continuing efforts to keep lands in the valley north of the WSO property in the hands of private owners committed to natural areas protection. Hopefully, the entire 2 1/2-mile long valley from the bog to the waterfall will become a protected natural area and permanent home for its varied and fascinating plant and animal life.

The first trek down the valley in 1956 was reverse in direction after the establishment of the State Natural Area, and became the annual May hike to the waterfall, an experience enjoyed by countless WSO members and friends over the past 30 years. Up to 85 species of birds have been recorded on each of these walks, including Kentucky Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, and Prairie Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher building nests, Pileated Woodpeckers, Acadian Flycatchers, and a host of others. With the entire valley under protection, this experience can continue to be enjoyed by many in the years to come.

Harold G. Kruse
Hickory Hill Farm
Loganville, WI 53943