

Controlled burn at Arcadia Marsh.

ARCADIA MARSH

Many natural areas acquired by GTRLC have various issues that need to be addressed for the health of the land and the enjoyment of those who visit it. Invasive species need to be controlled. Trails must be built or improved. Conservation misdeeds of the past need to be corrected.

Never in GTRLC's history has there been a more involved and concentrated effort to restore the health of an ecosystem than what's transpired at the Arcadia Marsh Nature Preserve. And what an ecosystem to restore! As one of the last remaining Great Lakes coastal marshes, Arcadia is as critical as it gets. At least 17 species of endangered or threatened birds use its fragile habitat, as do scores of other rare and threatened plants and animals.



PHOTO BY NATE RICHARDSON



PHOTO BY ANGIE LUCAS

“Coastal marshes are tremendously productive ecosystems,” said Chris Sullivan, GTRLC land protection specialist. “They are nearly as productive as tropical rainforests in terms of biomass per acre.”

It is estimated that as much as 80 percent of this type of habitat that once existed throughout the Great Lakes basin has been destroyed. About 85 marshes remain on Michigan’s entire Great Lakes coastline, with only 17 on the Lake Michigan coast of the Lower Peninsula. Before GTRLC protection, Arcadia was one of the state’s last remaining privately-owned marshes.

The story begins with Brad Hopwood, a lifelong Manistee County resident who spent much of his life near Arcadia. In the mid-1990s, he purchased a nearly 130-acre portion of the marsh when it went up for sale, and convinced friends Scott and Lisa Smith to purchase another 30 acres.

“At the time, we didn’t really know how it was going to work, but we knew what we needed to accomplish,” Brad Hopwood recalls.

Simply put, Brad and his wife Jan wanted to see the marshland – which had been adversely impacted by invasive species and decades-old landscape modifications – protected from additional harm. They knew it was important land that needed to be taken care of, and they felt strongly enough about this goal to take out a second mortgage to fund the purchase.

“At the time, we didn’t really know how it was going to work, but we knew what we needed to accomplish,” Brad Hopwood recalls. “I always just thought that, at a minimum, I could break even if I needed to.”

Hopwood eventually connected with GTRLC, which in 2007 and 2008 signed deals to purchase his land and that of the Smiths, forming the first core pieces of the Arcadia Marsh Nature Preserve. Fundraising for the \$450,000 required for purchasing the combined 160 acres wasn’t a walk in the park.



PHOTO BY ANGIE LUCAS

“It was difficult,” Sullivan said. “It was not long after the Coastal Campaign, and Elberta Dunes was going on as well.”

By this time, the marsh was not in the best shape. Aggressive invasive species like reed canary grass and phragmites – a tall, dense marsh grass with a penchant for completely dominating large swaths of wetland habitat – had wreaked havoc on the ecosystem. And a decades-old diversion had sent the naturally winding Bowens Creek into a long, straight ditch, warming its water and destroying natural riverine habitat.

“We bought it with the intention of trying to complete a large-scale restoration,” Sullivan said. “We were already looking for restoration grant money while we were still fundraising to finish paying off the purchase.”



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PHOTO BY CARL FREEMAN



Immediate treatments to control phragmites were the first step in what would become a years-long

restoration effort that continues to this day. GTRLC has partnered with several groups in this process, including Ducks Unlimited, the Conservation Resource Alliance, the Manistee County Road Commission, the Little River Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians and more.

Key funding has come from the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Sustain Our Great Lakes program, the Coastal Zone Management program, the United States Fish & Wildlife Service's North American Wetlands Conservation Act and private fundraising by GTRLC.

"The Conservancy was the only one in a position to accomplish what's been accomplished," said Hopwood, who still lives near the marsh. "They've worked with Ducks Unlimited and the tribe and all of these other great partners that they've been able to bring together. It's been really fantastic."

Among the most important restoration efforts at the marsh involved routing Bowens Creek from an old ditch back into its original, meandering channel. This added more than 3,700

feet of riverine habitat, as the winding creek channel was much longer than the straightened ditch. It also dropped

the temperature in the creek, improving habitat for trout, sculpins and other cold-water species.

"Our peak temperature was 10 degrees cooler after the change," Sullivan said.

Aside from creating problematic monocultures that provide little in the way of nesting or foraging habitats, both phragmites and canary reed grass also leave massive volumes of dead and decaying organic matter on the ground, choking out native plants and altering the critical marsh habitat by slowly raising its elevation. After treating the plants, GTRLC

and partners orchestrated a controlled burn to remove this thick layer of thatch and encourage repopulation of native species.

Although great strides have been made in the battle against pesky invasive species at the marsh, the war will likely always be ongoing, as is the case

with many properties where invasives are present.

"Unfortunately, the challenges are ongoing. None of it's going to stop, you just need to keep working on it," Hopwood said. "But the conservancy is in a unique position to understand

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these current and future issues and partner with people to figure out the best way to resolve them.”

Invasive control and habitat

improvements are already paying dividends. Wild rice, a threatened plant species, is making a comeback there. More than 150 bird species documented at the marsh now have a much better place to feed, nest and relax.

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Sullivan is grateful that Hopwood had a vision of protecting the marsh and worked with GTRLC to make it happen. Many of the partnerships and grants received for

work there wouldn’t have been possible had he not purchased the land and later agreed to sell it to the conservancy.

“For us to be as successful as we are, it’s a complete necessity to have private folks who are that committed to conservation,” he said. “The marsh is probably my favorite land protection project I’ve ever worked on, and without Brad stepping in, I would have never had that opportunity. Looking down at that creek flowing where it is supposed to for the first time in decades is really a highlight of my career.”

“UNFORTUNATELY, THE CHALLENGES ARE ONGOING. NONE OF IT’S GOING TO STOP, YOU JUST NEED TO KEEP WORKING ON IT,” HOPWOOD SAID. “BUT THE CONSERVANCY IS IN A UNIQUE POSITION TO UNDERSTAND THESE CURRENT AND FUTURE ISSUES AND PARTNER WITH PEOPLE TO FIGURE OUT THE BEST WAY TO RESOLVE THEM.”