Our Mission

The Wetlands Initiative is a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring the wetland resources of the Midwest to improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat and biodiversity, and reduce flood damage.
From Our Watershed to Yours

The work of the Wetlands Initiative starts with hydrology. Whether constructing a farm-based wetland to reduce nutrient runoff or restoring a marsh or prairie, we need to understand how water moves through the landscape. This often means thinking about a project site’s watershed. Geographically speaking, a watershed is a land area that channels surface water and groundwater to a common outlet, perhaps a river or lake or even a bay or ocean.

Like a Russian doll, smaller watersheds are nested in larger ones. The Big Bureau Creek Watershed is part of the Illinois River Watershed, which is part of the Mississippi River Watershed—the largest in North America. And if you looked just at the Big Bureau Creek Watershed, you’d find even smaller ones within it.

Watersheds represent just how interconnected different areas of the country are, and how what happens upstream—sometimes way upstream—can affect conditions downstream.

In English, we sometimes talk about a “watershed moment.” Scholars don’t seem to be too clear about the origin of the phrase or how it relates to the hydrologic concept of a watershed, but it fits the Wetlands Initiative right now. As we receive more and more requests to apply our restoration expertise—and as we approach our 25th anniversary in 2020—it feels like a watershed moment for the organization. TWI directors and staff are undertaking strategic planning during 2019 to consider how we can make the most difference in the conservation field in the years ahead.

We wouldn’t be at this moment in TWI’s history without the generosity of everyone who supports our work in actual watersheds. Many thanks to all the conservation-minded people who may not be thinking about hydrology when they make a donation to the Wetlands Initiative but know that contributing means better water quality, increased biodiversity, more flood storage, and more carbon sequestered in the ground—all good things in the face of a changing climate.

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Constructed Wetlands in the Farm Belt

A TWI-designed wetland on a Bureau County farm in north-central Illinois
Among its many initiatives, ISAP is working with Illinois Central College in East Peoria to expand its demonstration farm to highlight a suite of conservation practices to reduce nutrient loss. TWI has designed a constructed wetland, which is scheduled for installation in summer 2019. Through the college’s highly regarded and popular agricultural program, the next generation of farmers will have the opportunity to learn hands-on how “smart wetlands” can be part of a sustainable and productive operation.

The Mississippi River Watershed is the largest in North America—and the fourth largest in the world. It drains an area of 1.2 million square miles, including about 40% of the continental United States and a small part of two Canadian provinces. The river discharges 593,003 cubic feet of water per second into the Gulf of Mexico.

Included in the discharge are nitrogen and phosphorus picked up along the way, which cause the Gulf’s hypoxic “dead zone” each year. Among states in the watershed, Illinois is the #1 contributor of that nutrient pollution, most of it from agricultural runoff.

TWI continues to work with Illinois farmers to construct small wetlands to naturally and cost-effectively “treat” subsurface runoff before it hits the local waterway and heads downstream. TWI Senior Environmental Engineer Dr. Jill Kostel, who’s leading the project, likes to say she’s working at the smallest watershed scale with constructed wetlands while aiming to affect the nation’s biggest.

It’s going to take a lot of these farm-based wetlands dotting the landscape to significantly improve water quality all the way down to the Gulf. Scaling up their use will require collaborations like the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership (ISAP), of which TWI is a founding member alongside farm-sector groups such as the Illinois Corn Growers Association and American Farmland Trust.
Calumet Region

Planting native species at Indian Ridge Marsh
Driving east along I-94, just over the border from Illinois look out the passenger-side window and you’ll see the West Branch of the Little Calumet River in Indiana. Leveed off to prevent the flooding of adjacent neighborhoods, the corridor is like a big 2,000-acre bathtub full of invasive plants like phragmites.

Indiana’s Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission is collaborating with TWI, Audubon Great Lakes, and several local stakeholders to improve habitat quality and increase recreational opportunities along the West Branch. After more than a year of planning, on-the-ground efforts are scheduled to begin in 2019–20.

The Little Cal’s watershed has been so altered over the years the river now actually flows in two directions. Part of it flows east in Indiana and eventually empties into Lake Michigan through Burns Ditch, a manmade waterway. The westward flow crosses the border into Illinois. The exact point of the “flow divide” shifts a bit depending on water levels in the river and Lake Michigan, as well as climate conditions.

While the Little Cal’s hydrology is particularly altered, the entire Calumet region stretching from Chicago’s Southeast Side through northwest Indiana has been heavily marked by industrial and residential development. But many of the area’s remnant marshes hold restoration potential. Along with the new Little Calumet River project, TWI continues to work at Indian Ridge Marsh with Audubon Great Lakes and the Chicago Park District and to develop plans for other sites in the Calumet region in both Illinois and Indiana.
Midewin

Spreading milkweed seed by hand on a winter's day
In 2018, TWI started the third year of a seven-year restoration project at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, an hour south of Chicago. At more than 1,900 acres, it’s the largest single project yet for us at this U.S. Forest Service site, formerly the Joliet Army Arsenal. When completed, it will link previously restored parcels on Midewin’s west side into a 4,000-acre corridor of wetland and prairie habitats.

Grant Creek and Prairie Creek both flow through this new restoration area. Though not far apart, the creeks are in different watersheds. Prairie Creek empties into the Kankakee River, while Grant Creek is part of the Des Plaines River Watershed. Both the Kankakee and Des Plaines eventually flow into the Illinois River.

When the rains are heavy, Midewin’s creeks overflow their banks onto the adjacent floodplain—a natural feature of the original prairie landscape. The range of habitats in the restoration area, from wet to mesic to dry, means there is a corresponding range of native plant species to reintroduce.

Over the winter of 2018–19, TWI seeded 574 acres with 183 plant species—a total of 9,817 pounds of seed. We had never sown so much seed at one time and started working with growers a year in advance to ensure enough for this phase of the new project.

There were 4,500 pounds just of little bluestem seed, a matrix species for tallgrass prairie. Along with other common species, we also spread smaller amounts of seed for rarer plants like wood betony, blue-eyed grass, and false toadflax.

One day not far in the future, visitors will be able to experience seven different habitat types in this newly seeded, creek-crossed area of Midewin.
Dixon Waterfowl Refuge

Cuckoo Creek on a summer’s day
An intermittent stream runs through Sandy Hollow, the newest addition to TWI’s Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in north-central Illinois. We christened it Cuckoo Creek since it has no official name, in honor of the state-endangered Yellow-billed Cuckoo that hides high up in the trees of its floodplain forest.

Much of the year Cuckoo Creek is just a trickle or completely dry, but after a heavy rain it runs fast and deep. TWI’s geospatial analyst, Jim Monchak, mapped the creek’s watershed and found it reached much deeper into the area east of the Refuge than he expected, funneling rainwater down through Sandy Hollow to the Illinois River at the Refuge’s southern tip.

Sandy Hollow opened to the public in 2018, our third year of restoring the tract’s prairie, savanna, and other upland habitats. With its 2.7-mile, figure-8 trail, the area has already become a favorite among visitors to the Refuge. A rustic footbridge crosses Cuckoo Creek on the way to the Pyott Pavilion; open-sided and canopied, the pavilion is dedicated to TWI co-founder Al Pyott and a perfect place to rest and enjoy the view.

Sandy Hollow was a focus of TWI’s second-ever BioBlitz at the Refuge in August of 2018, during which experts spent 24 hours surveying the site’s biodiversity with the help of citizen scientists. Elusive Yellow-billed Cuckoos were actually spotted during a bird survey; even more exciting was the nighttime bat survey that included mist-netting over the streambed. Throughout the Refuge that weekend, participants identified more than 900 different species, from plants and fungi to birds, butterflies, bees, and more.

While small in size, the Cuckoo Creek Watershed is richer in biodiversity than many larger ones—all through TWI’s restoration of Sandy Hollow.
Financial Statements

2018 Revenue Breakdown

Program grants $830,104 $465,261
Contributions 682,470 666,080
Contributions—land — 2,406,374
Event income 68,406 —
Program fees 7,362 9,450
Miscellaneous income 53,691 53,497

$1,642,033 $3,600,662

Net assets released from restriction 1,859,857 816,094
Total revenue $3,501,890 $4,416,756

Expenses
Program $2,328,669 $1,635,319
Administration 155,539 156,495
Fundraising 221,725 162,040

Total expenses $2,705,933 $1,953,854
Increase in unrestricted net assets $795,957 $2,462,902

Temporarily Restricted Net Assets
Program grants $839,281 $695,485
Net assets released from restriction (1,859,857) (816,094)

Decrease in temporarily restricted net assets $(1,020,857) $(120,609)
Decrease (Increase) in Net Assets $(224,619) $2,342,293
Net Assets at Beginning of Year 9,508,261 7,165,968
Net Assets at End of Year $9,283,642 $9,508,261

Statement of Financial Position 2018 2017
Assets
Cash, cash equivalents, and investments $1,501,888 $2,049,671
Grants receivable 320,986 462,636
Pledges receivable 1,685,934 1,840,237
Accounts receivable 2,070 4,383
Prepaid expenses 26,004 23,640
Land and leasehold improvements 6,808,663 6,139,410
Equipment 323,128 265,298
Less—accumulated depreciation (439,130) (392,161)
Total assets $10,229,543 $10,393,114

Liabilities and Net Assets
Accounts payable $200,482 $101,475
Notes payable 653,277 692,671
Accrued expenses 155,539 156,495
Deferred revenue 221,725 162,040
Unrestricted funds 2,740,067 3,760,643
Temporarily restricted funds $6,543,575 5,747,618
Total liabilities and net assets $10,229,543 $10,393,114
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- The Walton Family Foundation

### A Celebration of Wetlands and Cranes

A Benefit Evening in Support of the Wetlands Initiative

Dr. George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, headlined TWI’s benefit in October 2018. Cranes are among the most endangered birds on Earth, and wetlands are their home. The evening raised more than $160,000 in support of TWI’s habitat restoration projects thanks to the generosity of sponsors and guests.

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Above: A capacity crowd
Left: Centerpiece with program
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Robert Smith
Donors to the Sandy Hollow Project in Honor of Al Pyott

A generous group came together to support the restoration of Sandy Hollow at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in honor of TWI co-founder Al Pyott. They also made possible the creation of trails, interpretive signs, a pavilion, and other features to enhance visitors’ experience of the Refuge. Sandy Hollow officially opened to the public on June 14, 2018, when Al cut the ribbon at the Pyott Pavilion.

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