



## **Irreplaceable Wetlands: An Anniversary Celebration & 2019 Annual Report**





## **Our Vision**

A world with plentiful healthy wetlands improving water quality, climate, biodiversity, and human well-being.



## 25 and counting

**W**e began the Wetlands Initiative's 25th-anniversary year in late 2019 with tons of momentum. All our projects were steadily progressing and in some places even expanding, particularly in the Calumet region hugging the southern shores of Lake Michigan. Just the type of restoration challenge TWI was created to take on.

At the end of 2019 TWI's directors and staff were also nearing the end of a strategic planning process. With so many changes at TWI in the past decade—along with even bigger changes in the world around us, perhaps most of all climate change—the planning effort was necessary and energizing.

And in the prosaic but critical area of fundraising, 2019 was a strong year. Many of you who are reading this were especially generous and we're really grateful. As 2020 started, we looked forward to celebrating TWI's past successes and future plans with everyone at a 25th-anniversary benefit in the fall.

But 2020 has taken a surprising turn. We never expected a pandemic would threaten our health, the economy, and our organization's work, and it's forced us to review all our operations in the field and at the office. At the same time, the nation's renewed civil rights movement is pushing the field of conservation to become more diverse and inclusive, a goal we'd already included in TWI's new strategic plan that's requiring a much deeper sort of operational review.

Despite the coronavirus, TWI's 25th-anniversary momentum has only been slowed a bit, not stopped. All of our projects are still moving ahead, with adjustments to protect everyone's health.

In particular, throughout Illinois' Farm Belt we're working with a growing list of landowners interested in installing a "smart wetland" on their farm to improve water quality.

We've had to pause implementation of some of our new strategic goals, though, and we definitely won't be celebrating our anniversary in person on October 1. That evening we were to be joined by the award-winning author and naturalist Julian Hoffman, whose new book, *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our Wild Places*, expresses so eloquently why we do what we do here at TWI. While Julian won't be joining us in Chicago, he has written an original essay for this booklet to launch TWI's next 25 years of ecological restoration.

All the world's wild places are irreplaceable but, as TWI co-founders Al Pyott and Donald Hey always argued, wetlands are especially valuable. Al's recent death on June 21, 2020, is a huge loss to TWI and we look back on his many achievements in these pages.

But if you really want to understand Al's conservation vision, pay a visit to TWI's Dixon Waterfowl Refuge and take in the view from the Pyott Pavilion at Sandy Hollow, the Refuge's most recent addition. Standing there you'll see what Al saw when he cut the ribbon in June 2018: a landscape of glorious prairie, savanna, and floodplain forest coming back to life.

What a legacy Al has left us. We hope you'll join us in sustaining it through the years to come.

**Caroline Repping**  
*Chair, Board of Directors*

**Paul Botts**  
*President & Executive Director*

*Left: The Dixon Waterfowl Refuge before and after restoration.*

# Restoring wetlands: a path into the future

By Julian Hoffman



Julian Hoffman, author and naturalist.

**W**We never know what might act as a spark when it comes to the natural world. It could be some profound and magnetic encounter with a wild animal or a commonplace connection with our local surroundings. It might be a long and thrilling journey through remote mountains or the evocative atmosphere of an old-growth forest. It could even be a mere fragment of nature that sets you on the way to a long and enriching relationship with the wild.

That's what happened to Bill Glass, a U.S. Forest Service ecologist at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie until his retirement in 2018. Although Bill had worked hand in hand with the Wetlands Initiative on the restoration of this remarkable site in northeast Illinois, I'm not sure they ever knew how his passion was first sparked. I'd met Bill while he was walking the tallgrass in early spring of 2016 after I'd set out for Midewin when writing a book about threatened places. Nearly everywhere else I explored while writing *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save our Wild Places* was at risk because of development of some kind: beautiful, flourishing, and important places under threat from the construction of airports, roads, and luxury houses, or imperiled by extractive industries that would spell their imminent end. But the prairie-wetland landscape was different, because so much of this complex ecosystem was already long gone from the tapestry of the continent that nicknames like the Prairie State for Illinois are just fanciful reminders of all that's been lost. With merely 0.01% of Illinois' historic tallgrass prairie still in existence, it's a state with just a memory of native grasses today. So, the question wasn't so

much about the protection of what remained but whether it was possible to bring any of the rest back.

Having long argued for an ambitious restoration of these once common landscapes, Bill had helped spearhead the work at Midewin. Although that April day was frozen through with bitter winds and squalls of lancing snow, I could easily see the magnificence of a place that had, until 1996, been the Joliet Army Arsenal. Its ongoing transformation by the Wetlands Initiative in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service into an expansive mosaic of prairie and wetland habitats is nothing short of extraordinary. But it was a far smaller and less spectacular tract of land that had initially fired Bill's fascination with the wild world.

"I did a BA in psychology with a minor in marketing," he said when I asked him how he got involved with ecological restoration. "But really I wanted to be a dentist." We broke into laughter at his unlikely vocational trajectory. "And for dentistry," he continued, "I needed biology. So when a biology professor took us to a quarter-acre prairie I just thought this was the coolest, neatest thing I'd ever seen."

Ever since that illuminating experience, Bill's life's work has been devoted to the preservation and restoration of wild places, an unexpected consequence of his encounter with a small but dazzling fragment of tallgrass. One of those minuscule remnants still left after the plowing under of most of the continent's prairies. Talking to Bill in the midst of a magical landscape that was no longer a site for the development and storage of vast quantities of ordnance

*Right: Bill Glass (center) with TWI Senior Ecologist Gary Sullivan (left) starting restoration of Midewin's Lobelia Meadows.*



*Below: Lobelia Meadows restored to a prairie-wetland landscape.*



but rather a set of healthy and beautifully complex habitats reminded me how even seemingly humble fragments can seed big ideas. And how the natural world, whenever we're in contact with it through a respectful sense of connection, can profoundly transform our lives.



This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Wetlands Initiative. Our plans for celebrating this fantastic achievement haven't unfolded as we'd intended due to the pandemic, but writing this piece at a time when COVID-19 has upturned our world

***“This work has never been more urgent and necessary, because we’re witnessing, in a way that’s both terrible and tragic, just what the profound cost is of continuing to destroy the natural world.”***

isn't entirely unconnected to TWI's mission either. Increasingly, it looks like the root cause of the pandemic was effectively the destruction of wild habitats, highlighting the critical need to protect ecosystems across the globe if humans are to flourish into the future alongside the wild species we share this planet with. This work has never been more urgent and necessary, because we're witnessing, in a way that's both terrible and tragic, just what the profound cost is of continuing to destroy the natural world.

Ensuring the vitality of the living world requires a two-pronged approach. Firstly, there's preservation—the retention of irreplaceable sites for their biodiversity, natural abundance, cultural significance, and wild character. That's part of what I sought to explore in my book, spending time with ordinary people who were fighting to save what mattered for both human and wild communities. We all potentially have a role to play in securing our important places, especially in light of how much we've needed them during the pandemic, utilizing them when safe to do so as places of rest, relaxation, wonder, and solace. Our personal and communal attachments to green

*Canoeing at TWI's Dixon Waterfowl Refuge, where the lakes had been drained for farming for almost 100 years before restoration began.*

spaces can be profoundly protective in character, particularly when we make ourselves stronger through cohesion, creating coalitions of care and concern when a beloved place is threatened by development and destruction. Many of the imperiled places I wrote about in *Irreplaceable* were ultimately saved by precisely this type of united front, when local campaigners harnessed a shared love of the natural world, transforming deep attachment into effective action.

Secondly, there's restoration—the conscious enabling of historic ecological processes in order to revivify entire lands and waters in our surroundings once more. You could think of this as a kind of healing, which is what the name Midewin essentially translates to, referring to the community of healers of the Anishinaabeg people who once dwelled on those prairies. Such repair and renewal are at the core of TWI's mission, which has meant the rehabilitation of places like the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes in north-central Illinois. Drained to make way for cropland in the early 20th century, this restored mosaic of lakes, marshes, prairies, savannas, and



seeps is now so critical to wildlife that it's been recognized as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

Beyond its immediate worth for local flora and fauna, the restoration of the Dixon Refuge has far-reaching significance. For no wetland exists in isolation; they are all connected in some way to other places and lives. They join together varied human communities through the prevention of storm surges and floodwaters, the provision of irrigation and drinking water, and the amelioration of climate change's disruptive effects. They provide a sequence of drinking holes for mammals on the move and a set of refuges for geographically limited wetland plants and flowers. And for migratory birds, such restored waters are critical lifelines.

I saw firsthand what such restorations can mean a few years ago when I tracked bird migration from southern Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco. My destination was a set of ancient salt pans and their wetlands near the Moroccan town of Larache. Despite their antiquity, the salt pans had been abandoned several years earlier, which meant the pools and lagoons had swiftly disappeared beneath the searing North African sun.

"We used to have tens of thousands of birds stopping here at any one time on migration," said Mohamed Dakki as we drove through fierce September heat toward the site. "There's even a record of 15,000 glossy ibises in a single day, plus all the water-birds that used to breed here." Mohamed was one of the conservationists in charge of a project being funded to restore the salt pans for the benefit of both local livelihoods and the protection of



*American white pelicans stopping over during migration at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge.*

birds. He put the place into context for me with stark simplicity. "There wasn't anything for the birds to stop for anymore after the salt pans closed. The land was dry and empty of life."

Because of Mohamed's bleak description, I wasn't prepared for the immense changes already underway with the restoration. After years of arid emptiness, we arrived to see hundreds and hundreds of avocets, godwits, and redshanks swirling over the glimmering waters. I watched black-winged stilts and great white egrets stalk the shallows while countless white storks courted the muddy edges as if on a parade. And out of the hot blue sky angled an osprey to snare a fish and lift away. Without the restored wetlands of the salt pans, all these birds would have faced the daunting prospect of migrating over the Sahara Desert with little in the way of replenishment. And their gathered clamor was all the more extraordinary because it had been completely silent only the year before.

Such transformations, whether in the Illinois River Valley or the arid zone north of the Sahara, are just some of the tangible and positive changes that wetland restoration can bring to lives both human and wild, helping connect communities to local opportunities while making safer the dangerous journeys of birds. They are havens of life in the broadest possible sense.



I've often thought of the restored wetlands and prairies of Midewin during this pandemic. Journeying through memory seemed a safe counterweight to sheltering in place, and Midewin felt like the ideal destination to remember given the circumstances. For it's a place that embodies the wide-ranging possibilities for recalibrating our relationships with the natural world. Not only does it help atone for the wrongs of the past by recognizing through its name the indigenous ancestry of the place, it also establishes a path into the future in which respectful coexistence with nature is foregrounded as fundamental to our well-being. And amidst the Sixth Extinction of wild species, when three billion birds alone have been lost from North America in just the past 50 years, Midewin also reveals, in a profoundly moving way, what can be returned to the world when we devote our energies, attention, and care to it.

In the depths of the pandemic I remembered how Midewin's cold April air rang with the songs of chorus frogs from the marshes. How migrating warblers threaded a stand of oaks with their southern colors and meadowlarks sang from the tall stalks of big bluestem still erect after a long winter. How the first green spears of rattlesnake master cracked the surface of the earth and turkey vultures circled slowly through the falling snow, like

***"Imagine if wetlands were more abundant, freely flowing and thriving in our surroundings; what ripples might spill outward from their waters?"***

they were tethered to carousels. I remembered how I could sense the summer to come amidst this movement, all the varied and vibrant tints that would soon spread across prairie, marsh, and woods. It was difficult to believe that this had been ruined ground not so many years earlier.

And while the buoyant sense of spring renewal was in part due to the great seasonal shift slowly pushing northward across the land, it was also because the place's underlying fortunes had been altered by a vision that it could be restored, so much so that bison, after such a long absence and their near-extinction from the entire continent, now roam Midewin's prairies and wetlands once more. I remembered how Arthur Pearson, my guide that day, summed up the scene as we stood overlooking a herd of these majestic animals in a dell less than 50 miles from downtown Chicago: "We've destroyed so much, but can heal some of it as well."



I'd like to return to that quarter-acre fragment of prairie that Bill Glass visited as a biology student. It might not seem much in the larger scale of things, but that small patch was sufficient to fire the imagination of at least one young man, setting him off on a path that held wildness at its heart. Now just imagine if the vista of that prairie were larger, or grasslands more common in our experience; what further transformations might they then trigger? Imagine if wetlands were more abundant, freely flowing and thriving in our surroundings; what ripples might spill outward from their waters? While fragments



of the wild retain a powerful potency to connect us to the natural world, our contact with them can be random and haphazard because of their relative size in the landscape of our lives. We can't afford to leave these vital connections to chance.

This is one of the reasons why the work of the Wetlands Initiative is so important: the restoration of damaged and destroyed ecosystems enables a greater spectrum of acquaintance to hold sway. When those fragments are made larger through the hard work of restoration, or are woven together with other wild waters and lands through connective corridors and living bridges, we not only provide crucial lifelines for wild creatures but make space for transformative possibilities among ourselves. Whether it's to urban, suburban, or rural places that we feel an attachment, or a combination of all three, the presence of the wild nearby can expand the horizon of human aspiration.

When I consider how TWI's new restoration projects in the Calumet region are beginning to connect communities on Chicago's Southeast Side and in northwest Indiana to transformed and vibrant habitats that had been lost to industrial and residential sprawl, I see how opportunities to benefit both wildlife and human societies aren't mutually exclusive but rather sit paired at the very heart of restorative practices. Such projects offer us a glimpse of a possible future. With our landscapes more richly patterned with natural features through a combination of habitat protection and ecological restoration, we encourage affinity with the more-than-human world, greatly increasing the chances that its wild wonder and beauty will enlarge our lives in meaningful and enduring ways.



*Planting seedlings to help restore Indian Ridge Marsh in Chicago's Calumet region.*

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Julian Hoffman is an award-winning author and naturalist. His first book, *The Small Heart of Things*, won the 2014 National Outdoor Book Award for Natural History Literature and his most recent book, *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our Wild Places*, was a finalist for the 2020 Wainwright Prize for Writing on Global Conservation.

For TWI's 25th anniversary, in addition to writing this original essay, Julian scripted and appears in a video filmed in northern Greece, where he lives by a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. You can explore Greece's Prespa Lakes with Julian at [www.wetlands-initiative.org](http://www.wetlands-initiative.org).

## Remembering Al Pyott

**T**he Wetlands Initiative would not exist without Al Pyott, who died on June 21, 2020.

As a co-founder, he believed wetlands are a critical yet undervalued part of our environment. And with so much of the wetland landscape lost in the Midwest, he knew TWI's mission would need to be one of restoration to make a real difference, not simply preservation of remnants.

After co-founding TWI in 1994 with Donald Hey, Al served the organization at different times as president, director, and chairman. He was always TWI's biggest cheerleader.

One of Al's greatest conservation achievements was the creation in 2001 of the Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in Hennepin, Illinois. Al led TWI's effort to acquire the land and

restore it back to native habitats—something even he initially called a “harebrained scheme.”

By 2012, restoration of the Dixon Refuge was so successful it was designated a Wetland of International Importance under the global Ramsar Convention, in recognition of its extraordinary biodiversity. There are only a few dozen Ramsar sites in the United States and, before TWI existed, Al played a key role in another Ramsar site, the Cache River–Cypress Creek Wetlands in southern Illinois.

Al made a difference to many conservation organizations in Illinois besides our own. Before co-founding TWI, he was executive director of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy. He also served in various capacities with the Illinois

*Al Pyott (center) with his wife, Liza, and their children at the dedication of the Pyott Pavilion at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in June 2018.*





Nature Preserves Commission, the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board, and others.

In honor of his conservation legacy in Illinois and at the Wetlands Initiative, in 2018 TWI dedicated restoration of Sandy Hollow at the Dixon Refuge to Al. In June of that year, he cut the ribbon on the Pyott Pavilion at Sandy Hollow, which has become a favorite spot for visitors to the site. There they can take in an expansive view of restored prairie, savanna, and floodplain forest—and be inspired by Al’s conservation vision.

That vision still guides the Wetlands Initiative as we embark on our next 25 years of ecological restoration in the region.

Thank you for everything, Al.

*“The bottom line that means so much to us who do this work is not so much the floristic diversity, as impressive as that is, but what it means for people. That’s really the reward.”*

— Al Pyott speaking at the 10th anniversary of the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge in 2011

## Contributions in memory of Al Pyott

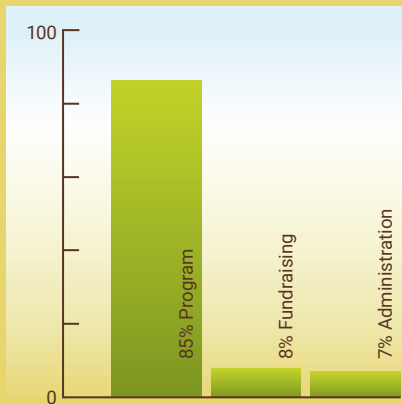
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Caroline Repenning	Michael and Judy Zeddies

# Financial Statements

## 2019 Expense Breakdown



## Statement of Activities

	2019	2018
<b>Revenue</b>		
Program grants	\$512,051	\$830,104
Contributions	705,973	682,470
Event income	230	68,406
Program fees	13,366	7,362
Miscellaneous income	61,804	53,691
	<u>\$1,293,424</u>	<u>\$1,642,033</u>
Net assets released from restriction	1,291,123	1,859,857
Total revenue	\$2,584,547	\$3,501,890
<b>Expenses</b>		
Program	\$2,084,833	\$2,328,669
Administration	166,543	155,539
Fundraising	207,640	221,725
	<u>\$2,459,016</u>	<u>\$2,705,933</u>
Increase in unrestricted net assets	\$125,531	\$795,957
<b>Temporarily Restricted Net Assets</b>		
Program grants	\$799,797	\$839,281
Net assets released from restriction	(1,291,123)	(1,859,857)
	<u>\$(491,326)</u>	<u>\$(1,020,576)</u>
Decrease in Net Assets	\$(365,795)	\$(224,619)
Net Assets at Beginning of Year	9,283,642	9,508,261
Net Assets at End of Year	\$8,917,847	\$9,283,642

## Statement of Financial Position

	2019	2018
<b>Assets</b>		
Cash, cash equivalents, and investments	\$1,016,116	\$1,501,888
Grants receivable	552,161	320,986
Pledges receivable	1,432,178	1,685,934
Accounts receivable	16,467	2,070
Prepaid expenses	21,848	26,004
Land and leasehold improvements	6,977,387	6,808,663
Equipment	375,747	323,128
Less—accumulated depreciation	(518,248)	(439,130)
Total assets	<u>\$9,873,656</u>	<u>\$10,229,543</u>
<b>Liabilities and Net Assets</b>		
Accounts payable	\$196,050	\$200,482
Notes payable	612,892	653,277
Accrued expenses	146,867	83,809
Deferred revenue	—	8,333
Unrestricted funds	6,669,106	6,543,575
Temporarily restricted funds	2,248,741	2,740,067
Total liabilities and net assets	<u>\$9,873,656</u>	<u>\$10,229,543</u>

# 2019 Donors

## Institutional Donors

### \$100,000 and above

Ducks Unlimited  
National Forest Foundation  
The Walton Family Foundation

### \$25,000 to \$99,999

Audubon Great Lakes  
Illinois Clean Energy  
Community Foundation  
Illinois Nutrient Research  
& Education Council

### \$10,000 to \$24,999

The Buchanan Family Foundation  
Full Circle Foundation  
Illinois Department of  
Natural Resources  
The Nature Conservancy

### \$5,000 to \$9,999

Grand Victoria Foundation  
GreenCycle, Inc.  
Oberweiler Foundation

### \$1,000 to \$4,999

BDT & Company, LLC  
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Ecolab Foundation  
Exelon Braidwood  
Generating Station  
Harrah's Joliet Casino & Hotel  
Waste Management

### Up to \$999

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Coastal Chemical Co.  
The Richard H. Driehaus  
Foundation

Give Mortgage, Inc.  
Gleason Finance  
The Home Depot  
Illinois Ornithological Society  
The Lakota Group  
Robert R. McCormick Foundation  
Sandhill Coffee  
Sidley Austin LLP  
United Way of  
Metropolitan Chicago  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
Wrigley Company Foundation  
Zoia Monument Company  
Anonymous (1)

### Midwin "Prairie Champions" (both employee volunteers and corporate grants)

DuPont  
Ecolab Foundation  
Exelon Braidwood  
Generating Station  
Harrah's Joliet Casino & Hotel  
Waste Management

### Continuing Multi-Year Grants Received Prior to 2019

Audubon Great Lakes  
The Buchanan Family Foundation  
Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley  
Foundation  
Grand Victoria Foundation  
Illinois Clean Energy  
Community Foundation  
The McKnight Foundation  
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Foundation, Monarch Butterfly  
Conservation Fund  
Abra Prentice Foundation, Inc.  
The Walton Family Foundation

## Bringing TWI's 25th anniversary to you

We were really excited that award-winning author and naturalist Julian Hoffman was going to be joining us in Chicago in October 2020 as the speaker at TWI's 25th-anniversary gala—and really disappointed when COVID-19 put an end to those plans.

Thanks to a generous group of companies, we're able to bring Julian to you at home. Not only has Julian written an original essay that you can read in this booklet, he has scripted and narrated a new TWI video on wetlands that is available on our website. In the video Julian answers the oft-asked question, "Why wetlands?"

You can also catch another anniversary video on our website featuring TWI Executive Director Paul Botts and Board Chair Caroline Repenning describing what's in store for the organization in the years ahead—along with some stunning new footage of our current restoration projects.

So even though we can't celebrate TWI's 25th anniversary together in person, we're grateful to the following companies for helping us make it memorable in other ways that we can share with you wherever you are.

### Lead Sponsor

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### Supporting Sponsors



### Video Production



TWI's 25th-anniversary videos are available for viewing at [www.wetlands-initiative.org](http://www.wetlands-initiative.org).

# 2019 Donors

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### \$10,000 to \$24,999

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### \$5,000 to \$9,999

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### \$1,000 to \$2,499

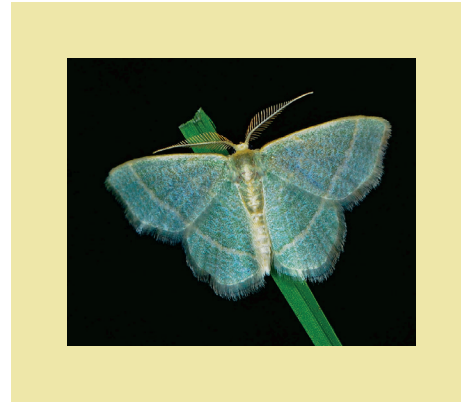
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## In memory of Karen Fisher

In fall 2019, longtime TWI supporter Bob Fisher offered to match new and increased donations received by year-end in memory of his wife, Karen, who had died earlier in 2019. Married for more than 50 years, Bob and Karen shared a passion for birdwatching. They were frequent visitors to TWI's Dixon Waterfowl Refuge—one of Karen's favorite places—and together were deeply committed to restoring our region's native habitats.

Almost 200 people responded to Bob's generosity in memory of Karen and her love for birds and the natural world, even some people who didn't know her. There were so many that Bob actually increased the amount of his match. Bob knows the name of each of you who was inspired by Karen's life and you're all included in this annual report's donor list for 2019. Somewhere Karen is smiling.



*The birding platform at the Dixon Refuge, just south of the boat launch, conceived and made possible by Karen and Bob Fisher in 2017.*

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**Design** Lisa Plefka Haskin • **Printing** Mittera

**Editing** Suzanne L. Wagner/TWI

**Photography** Cornelius Bouknight: page 15;  
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Ken Hoffman: page 2;  
Vera Leopold/TWI: page 8;  
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Iza Redlinski: pages 3 (top), 4;  
Gary Sullivan/TWI: pages 3 (bottom), 5, 7, 12, 14, 16

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