



Michigan Wildlife Conservancy Celebrating 25 Years of Success Thanks to You!



Left: "The Way It Was," painted by Rod Lawrence, depicts a part of the Reithmiller Marsh owned by Russ Bengel for many years. Right: Russ Bengel (l) and frequent hunting companion Howard Sayre, Chief Field Officer of the Michigan Department of Conservation of Lansing, in circa 1945 photo. Russ grew up in an era of abundance and lived to witness the loss of more than half of Michigan's wetlands.

During the past 25 years, the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy (MWC) has become an important player in the restoration of our state's natural resources. The one person most responsible for that success was our founder, Russ Bengel. He had the vision, the financial resources, and the contacts to begin a new wildlife movement.

That movement started in 1980 as the Michigan Waterfowl Foundation and formally became the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation on September 1, 1982. One more name change occurred in 2003, to better characterize our efforts. Since that time, Russ' vision has been known as the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy.

Though many years have passed and the names may have changed, our mission has remained constant. We still follow the vision conceived by Russ Bengel more than a quarter of a century ago—to leave future generations a wildlife legacy of abundance and diversity.

Russ believed we could do that by being creative, efficient and making sure our work was additive—that is, making sure our dollars were not merely supplanting state or federal funds.

Russ Bengel was a private man. Few people knew this sensitive, dedicated and generous individual well. When I think of Russ, I am reminded of the words of Carlisle: "A great man shows his greatness by the way he treats little men." Russ Bengel treated everyone well and is remembered by his followers as a great man and one of the great Michigan conservationists of the 20th century.

Russ was born in Wisconsin in 1898, and moved to Jackson, Michigan as a young boy. Although smart and industrious, he only attended school through the 10th grade. As a teenager, he went to work to learn the business of business. While working full-time, he attended night school to learn accounting so he could take the Certified Public Accountant exam.

He learned his lessons well, and eventually became a partner in, and then sole owner of, General Products Corporation of Jackson, an automobile supply company.

Though Russ was a successful and well-respected businessman, his first love was the out-of-doors. Waterfowling was his favorite—a sport that also sensitized him to the loss of wetlands

throughout the continent.

Russ learned to hunt ducks as a teenager in the Jackson area from a commercial hunter, before the practice was prohibited. Growing up in those times of abundance and hunting every chance he had, Russ witnessed the miracle of nature firsthand and also the disappearance of half of Michigan's wetlands.

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A Vision for the Ages

Things were so much simpler in 1982 when the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy was created. Habitat issues really had only one dimension—the loss of millions of acres of productive wildlife habitat. Problems that were so narrowly focused were much easier to address. We just worked to fix the acres in question or tried to create more habitat by planting, enhancing, or changing site conditions.

The climate for habitat restoration is changing. Literally. The last decade has brought new awareness of how global environmental conditions, such as the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere, will ultimately affect every wildlife species on earth. It is not a habitat question as we traditionally think of it, but more a matter of distribution and range changes for every species. The National Arbor Day Foundation has released a new Hardiness Zone



Things were much simpler in 1982, when the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation was founded and the predominant threat to wildlife was the loss of productive wildlife habitats.

map reflecting rising temperatures. Plants which grew in more southerly states are now gaining a foothold in Michigan. That's true for wild plants as well as ornamentals. As an organization we can restore surface features, but we must take collective action as individuals to slow global warming. We need to educate ourselves and accept change in our lives to minimize change in our environment.

Invasive exotic species are another issue that habitat conservationists did not even consider a decade ago. Exotics have been with us forever, but we've slowly adapted to them. Examples like carp, house sparrow, and lamprey are commonly known to all. But the new wave of exotics is coming rapidly and the implications much more ominous. Today's exotics aren't just higher order plants and animals, but viruses and microscopic organisms that can hide in a thimbleful of water.

Our Great Lakes are under siege today, with a new species arriving in the belly of a ship about every seven months. It is reported that the Great Lakes currently harbor 183 known exotic species.

What can the Conservancy do to keep

exotics out of the Great Lakes? Plenty! We have joined hands with nearly 100 other wildlife and conservation groups in the U.S. and Canada to protect the largest freshwater feature on the planet. In this case protecting the habitat requires that we become advocates on the Lakes' behalf. Collectively, the Healing Our Water Coalition has called for a ban on saltwater ships entering the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River system until the U.S. and Canada adopt an effective ballast water treatment program.

Terrestrial exotics have also become an immense problem in our state. Invasive plants pose a threat to wildlife as significant as that of habitat destruction. And these terrestrial exotics are smothering the landscape at a rapid pace. The Conservancy plans to respond by educating and training our citizens to recognize and eliminate exotic organisms in their communities.



The Conservancy uses the Bengel Wildlife Center as an incubator for new ideas to address wildlife's problems.

The Conservancy will increasingly use the Bengel Wildlife Center as an education and training facility to address all future threats that face the wild creatures of our state. We want the Bengel Wildlife Center to be the incubator for new ideas and future approaches to sustaining the environment.

The future challenges that face wildlife are hard to predict. We know only that there will be many, and some will be completely new to us. To succeed we will have to stay creative, efficient and nimble. But most of all we will have to be open to changing the way we operate, because what is being thrown at us is constantly changing. The Conservancy will be up to the task because we are not married to a single way of looking at problems. With the support of Michigan's citizens we are confident that the movement begun by Russ Bengel in 1982 will succeed in sustaining the wild creatures that enrich our lives for all time. 🍁

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The Michigan Wildlife Conservancy is a non-profit membership organization that restores and conserves fish, wildlife and habitat.

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The Great Lakes are being threatened like never before, with a new exotic species arriving by ship approximately every seven months.



We innovate to help wildlife! Projects On the Ground—That Work!

There are many organizations concerned with the state of our natural lands. So what sets the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy (MWC) apart from other organizations that may share similar interests? The MWC's dedication to practical, "on-the-ground" projects that work.

Since our inception, we have restored thousands of acres of wetlands and prairies, and countless miles of streams, rivers and creeks located in such geographically diverse areas as the Escanaba River in Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Paint Creek which flows through Oakland County, one of the most highly populated locations in the state.

Key to the MWC's success is the organization's dedication to mobilizing private and public sector resources as efficiently as possible. Instead of simply writing checks to another agency to carry out the work, the Conservancy acts as a "general contractor"—employing professionals who have the skills to design and supervise construction so that ideas to benefit wildlife can successfully become cost-effective finished projects.

What difference does our commitment to cost-effectiveness make?

The average cost of wetland restoration by the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy is about \$250 per acre. Some developers and government agencies spend up to \$100,000 per acre to create wetlands to replace those drained in the course of their work.

The result is not only that more wildlife habitat can be restored for less money, but the impact on Michigan wildlife is impressive as well.

Thanks in large part to wetland restoration, the number of nesting colonies of great blue herons has nearly doubled in Michigan during the past 30 years. Great egrets, another colonial wading bird, are gradually moving northward into Michigan in greater numbers.

Sandhill crane populations have increased dramatically from a low in the early 1900s. Michigan's Lower Peninsula now has about 700 nesting



A 70-acre wetland restoration near Edmore was completed by MWC, the Montcalm County Drain Commissioner and USFWS. It now provides refuge to thousands of ducks during migration.



The Bark River, in Delta County, received significant stream improvement work through a partnership with Delta County Wildlife Unlimited.

pairs, up from 43 in 1954 and 157 in 1973.

Bald eagle nesting pairs in Michigan started to increase in the 1980s, doubling their numbers over the previous decade and becoming more widespread. Just recently our national symbol was removed from the Federal Threatened Species list.

The Conservancy's first major project—the Milli-Ander Wetland Restoration, located on both sides of US-127 north of St. Johns at the Maple River State Game Area—has provided prime habitat for bald eagles, osprey and great blue herons for 23 years.

Trout are now flourishing in one of the few trout streams found in southeastern Michigan—Paint Creek—which flows out of Lake Orion, northeast of Pontiac. For years, lake surface water had spilled over a high dam into the creek making water temperatures in much of the stream simply too warm for trout to thrive.

The solution, designed and implemented by the MWC, was to install a bottom draw system that allows summertime release of cold water from the bottom of the lake into the stream. The project required major construction, including pushing a 30-inch steel casing through 90 feet of earth under M-24, a busy four-lane highway. Today, the Village of Lake Orion can manage cold water releases that benefit trout downstream, and can maintain desirable lake levels as well.

North of Edmore in rural Montcalm County, a couple of thousand ducks, more than 500 geese, and an abundance of muskrats are now calling a "hemi-marsh" (a patchy network of open water and a variety of emergent plants) home. The wetland was created by the Conservancy in partnership with the county drain commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Prior to restoration, the property consisted of two large basins occupying 70 acres that had been ineffectively drained via a system of dikes, ditches