

owl creek conservancy



Annual Report  
2024

Ashcraft Easement

## Our Mission

The Owl Creek Conservancy is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving natural and agricultural lands in the Knox County Area through widespread private action. We work with landowners for the public good to maintain and to improve the quality of life now and in the future by conserving farmlands, stream corridors, aquifer- and watershed-protection areas, wildlife habitats, woodlands, scenic vistas, and ecologically sensitive areas of environmental, historic and community importance.



Pictured from left to right: Marcie Steen, Greg Spaid, Carol Detmer, Harlow Walker, Todd Vermilya, Bob Gunther, Jeff Wells, Kim Davidson, Vicki Kauffman, Jodie Phelan, Mike O'Neill, Harry Itagaki, Beth Waller  
Not pictured: Kyle Walls

A note from  
the desk  
of our  
president



Stepping into the president's role last July, I felt truly honored to succeed Ray Heithaus, who set a high bar for land conservation in Knox County. In my first year, my main goal has been to better understand easements and to learn how to advocate for them effectively.

Easements significantly impact land use and acquiring them is the crucial first step in protecting land for the future. They are an indispensable tool for conserving land while also safeguarding the long-term land use goals of the landowner. While securing these easements is important, ongoing stewardship is essential to sustain them. Long after we are gone, the Owl Creek Conservancy will live on, maintaining and protecting these easements in perpetuity.

With the capable resolve of the board and staff of the Conservancy, we continue to move forward. Our organization has made significant strides in protecting farmland, habitats, and ultimately, our collective future. This past year, we extended our reach by acquiring easements on approximately 322 more acres of critical land, expanded our community outreach programs, and launched several new initiatives, such as transforming our Annual Meeting into a more casual and welcoming Annual Gathering.

Through strong partnerships and your generous support, we have continued to protect vital lands, helping maintain the rural character of our area. As we look ahead, we remain committed to promoting sustainable practices, strengthening policy advocacy, and ensuring the lasting preservation of Knox County's natural resources.

Together, we can continue to protect our countryside for generations to come.

Thank you for your unwavering support!

*Kim Davis*

# Our Newest Easements: Ashcraft

by Vicki Kauffman

Rick and Matt Ashcraft run a father-and-son grain operation in the Fredericktown area. They rent ground in addition to raising crops on their own land, and in any given year will farm about 2,000 acres. Because farming full time, raising young twin girls and serving as a Wayne Township trustee isn't enough to keep him busy, Matt also farms on a smaller scale. He raises sweet corn in the summer which he sells at his farmstand on Cassell Road, and in the fall, he raises and sells unusual varieties of pumpkins. It's a hard-working lifestyle, and one that suits Rick and Matt well.

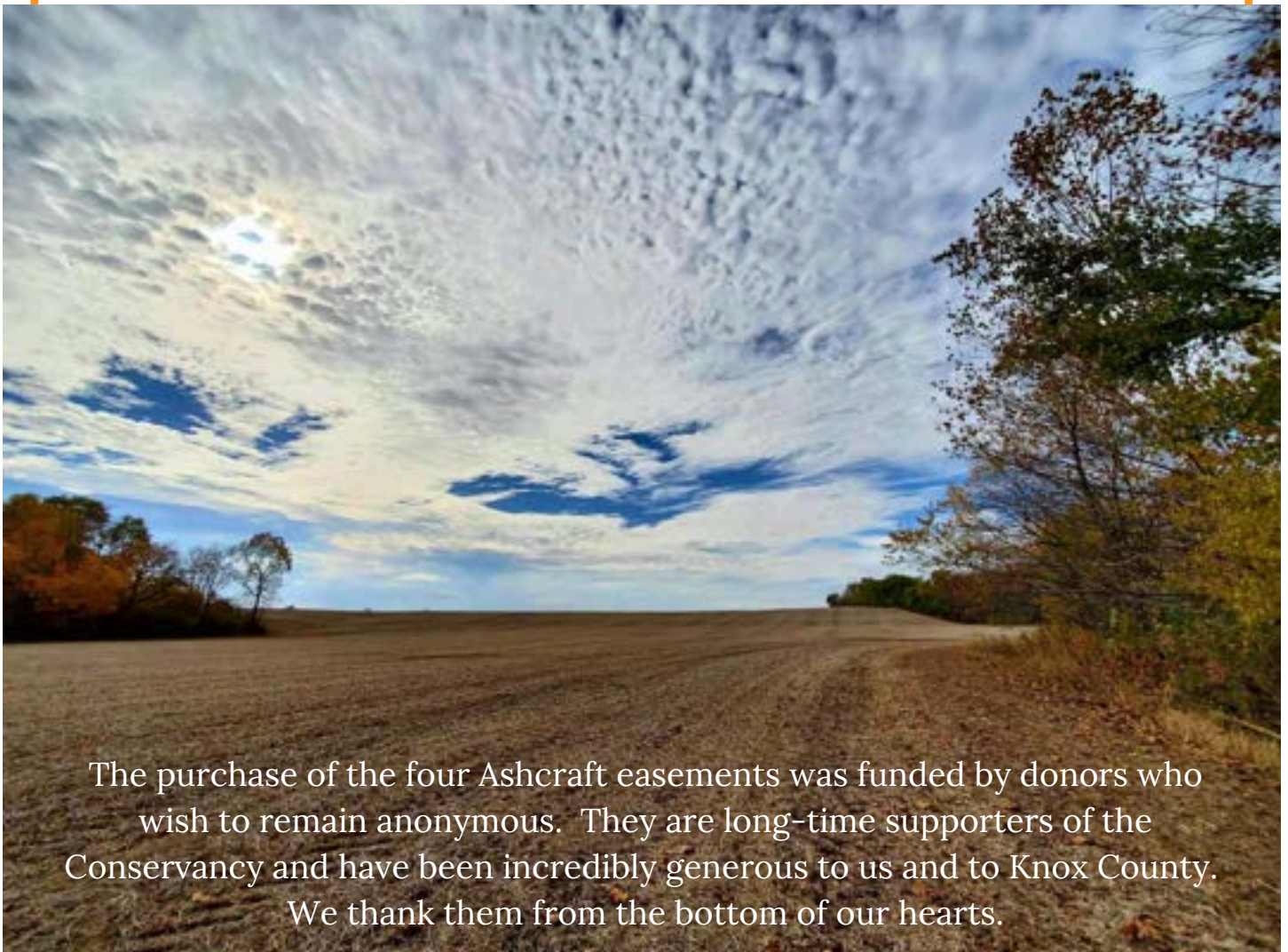


The Ashcraft projects were a challenge because their Protected Property covers approximately 322 acres in two townships on three roads, and is in five parcels that were held by three different combinations of titleholders. This unique situation resulted in four separate conservation easements. Partially because of external factors such as title searches, surveys, and appraisals, an easement easily takes a year to complete. The fact that the Conservancy and the Ashcrafts were able to pull off four easements simultaneously is an accomplishment and a testament to how important it was to the family to protect their land. The Ashcrafts were cautioned against committing their land to conservation by those who thought they should consider the increasing development price their farmland could bring. Rick firmly stated, **“No amount of money is worth losing farm ground. Once it's gone, it's gone.”**



The Ashcrafts' Protected Properties are primarily dedicated to agricultural use. The first easement is on Bryant Road, where Matt and Candace live, and is next door to the Brad and Melinda Lanker Protected Property. The second Protected Property on Dean Road is fully cultivated. The remaining two easements are located side by side on Cassell Road, where seven acres have been designated as a Riparian Area, safeguarding over 1,000 feet of the North Branch of the Kokosing State Scenic River.

***The board and staff of the Owl Creek Conservancy thank the Ashcraft family for their steadfast commitment to preserving farmland in Knox County.***



The purchase of the four Ashcraft easements was funded by donors who wish to remain anonymous. They are long-time supporters of the Conservancy and have been incredibly generous to us and to Knox County. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts.

# Land Steward Report

by Jeff Wells

In my role as the Land Steward for the Owl Creek Conservancy, I oversee the enforcement of conservation and agricultural easements on Protected Properties. Once an easement is established on a designated "Protected Property," my team and I take the necessary steps to post signage that identifies the land as "private property," safeguarded by the Owl Creek Conservancy. This crucial task not only delineates the property boundaries but also upholds the rights of the landowner (Grantor).



The Owl Creek Conservancy monitoring team physically visits each Protected Property at least once a year to ensure the easement conditions are followed.



Jeff installing signage



This sign has been deliberately damaged

We also handle the repair and replacement of signs affected by Mother Nature, agricultural machinery, theft, or intentional damage. During our property patrols, we monitor for signs of encroachment, such as trespassing, as well as any incidents of damage, dumping, or other activities that could breach the easement. We then communicate our observations to the Grantor and offer assistance as needed to address any identified violations, including conducting follow-up visits if required.



Harry crossing a stream while monitoring

# Policy & Fundraising Committee Reports

by Harry Itagaki



## Policy Committee:

As chairperson, I, along with fellow board members Carol Detmer and Beth Waller, have dedicated much of the past six months to refining and updating the bylaws and board manual of the Owl Creek Conservancy. An updated version of the bylaws was approved in May, and we are currently reviewing various sections of the board manual. This effort has led to the removal of inconsistencies, outdated language, and irrelevant information, with the aim of enhancing the clarity and conciseness of the board manual.



## Fundraising Committee:

The fundraising committee is comprised of Kim Davidson, Marcie Steen, and myself, Harry Itagaki. We began our work in the fall of 2023 by reviewing previous fundraising initiatives and brainstorming innovative strategies to secure the necessary funds for our Endowment Fund and the annual budget. With significant support from Vicki Kauffman and Jodie Phelan, the committee has gained valuable expertise in utilizing Little Green Light, a donor management software, allowing them to monitor memberships and donations with greater accuracy and efficiency. Our efforts to recruit new members and boost participation are ongoing, and we aim to enhance our fundraising practices. Additionally, we hope to increase the number of members who include us in their estate plans through our Planned Giving Program.



# Outreach Committee Report

by Marcie Steen



Each month, the outreach committee convenes to plan and organize events, as well as to brainstorm innovative ways to inform the public about the work of the Owl Creek Conservancy and the significance of land conservation. This committee was established in early 2022 to:

- Improve relations with existing easement Grantors as well as perspective Grantors
- Increase awareness of the Conservancy within its membership and in the general public
- Grow and strengthen our membership



At the Knox County Fair talking about land conservation



Picking up trash at one of our Adopt-a-Highway events



Enjoying the 'Flight of the Chimney Swifts' event

**We're constantly working to improve communication within the Owl Creek membership and encourage participation in our events. Through our events, we strive to educate community members about our work and promote conservation.**



# Special Thanks to our partners and volunteers

Amanda Bennett, Ohio Department of Agriculture  
Nick Clark and the YMCA of Mount Vernon  
Rob Clendening, Knox Soil and Water Conservation District  
Jay Dorsey, Water Resources Engineer, OH2O, LLC  
John Dowalter, Knox Consulting, LLC  
Doug Gifford, Natural Resources Conservation Services  
Morgan Giles, Giles Law Group, LLC  
Emily Heithaus, Mountainhaus Art and Design  
Amy Henricksen, Philander Chase Conservancy  
Knox County Auditor's Office  
Knox County Recorder's Office  
Knox County Foundation  
Ed Meyers, Attorney  
Darrel Severns, Knox County Regional Planning Commission  
Justin Smith, Knox County Tax Map Office

## **Volunteers:**

Richard Barker  
Greg Culbertson  
Jay Dorsey  
Dan Galbraith  
Jeff Kauffman  
Janet Kohr  
Kim Lenkei  
William Stanley  
Jim Steen  
Pat Wells  
Mount Vernon Key Club



Chimney Swift Event



River Rally Event



Litter pick-up on SR 95



Monitoring the Blackjack Wetland



*Annual Gathering  
2024*



*The Annual Gathering took place on June 23rd at the scenic KnoxView Farm Winery, drawing in double the attendees of previous years. A heartfelt "thank you" to Owl Creek Conservancy Life Members John and Gayle Dowalter for hosting our most successful event to date.*



**KnoxView Farm Winery is located off SR 95 just west of Fredericktown at 7524 Phillips Road. Please visit [KnoxViewFarmWinery.com](http://KnoxViewFarmWinery.com) for hours and more information**

# \$10,000 Matching Grant a Success!

by Vicki Kauffman

At the beginning of 2024, the Owl Creek Conservancy was informed by the Knox County Foundation that an anonymous benefactor had pledged \$10,000 to match donations made to the Conservancy's Endowment Fund by December 31, 2024.

The Endowment Fund is an asset managed by the Knox County Foundation and is a true endowment, meaning that the principal cannot be distributed. All (100%) of the annual income generated by the Fund is fully available for cash distribution. If the Conservancy does not request a distribution, the income is added to the Fund's principal.

The daily operations of the Conservancy rely heavily on the Endowment Fund. Currently, the Conservancy oversees 48 conservation and agricultural easements across four counties, encompassing 5,610 acres, and we are actively engaged in four more projects. This requires extensive management! Without the Endowment Fund, the crucial work we do to safeguard the lands and waters of the Knox County Area would not be feasible.



Thanks to the extraordinary support from our community, we surpassed our fundraising target. In a short period of time we received an impressive influx of generous donations, totaling nearly \$18,000 and taking us well beyond our goal!

# Interested in Donating?

You can easily contribute online by scanning the relevant QR code or by mailing a check to the address provided below.  
Thank you for your continued support of the Conservancy!

## *The General Fund*

Provides support for the Conservancy's daily operations and various expenses



## *The Chimney Swift Towers Initiative*

Funds the construction of Chimney Swift Towers in the Knox County Area



You can also make a donation to any of our managed funds:

## *The Endowment Fund*

Generates income that supports the Conservancy's mission



## *The Conservation Easement Acquisition Fund*

Helps cover expenses of implementing conservation easements



## *The Stewardship Fund*

Provides support for the monitoring and enforcement of conservation and agricultural easements



## *The Memorial Fund*

Entwines the memory of a loved one with the positive efforts of the Conservancy



## Connect with us:

PO Box 291  
Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050  
740-392-6952

[info@owlcreekconservancy.org](mailto:info@owlcreekconservancy.org)  
[OwlCreekConservancy.org](http://OwlCreekConservancy.org)



@OwlCreekConservancyOhio  
owl-creek-conservancy



## Join us in welcoming Jodie to the Owl Creek Conservancy family!

by Vicki Kauffman

The Conservancy was fortunate to hire Jodie Phelan in October of 2023 as a part-time assistant to the director. Jodie handles the daily tasks of the office and oversaw the migration of decades of data when the Conservancy transferred to its new non-profit database system, a lengthy and involved project. Jodie channels over 30 years of floral industry design experience into creating attractive, eye-catching mailings and social media posts, and making our website more welcoming and user-friendly. Thanks to her creative ability, all of our outreach materials, both paper and digital, are generated in-house, which saves the Conservancy both time and money. Always on the lookout for ways to be thrifty on behalf of our non-profit, she searches out opportunities from coupons to grants, and most recently landed a \$500 grant for promotional items.

Jodie lives near Centerburg with her husband Mark and dogs Lexie, a Red Heeler/Great Pyrenees mix and Wilder, a recent rescue from the Licking County Humane Society. She owns an Etsy store dedicated to handcrafted cryptid ornaments – Ornamental Gal on Etsy.com. She and Mark enjoy traveling the world and spend time every year at her family’s cabin on Lake Michigan.

### Easement Grantors and Successor Grantors

Matt and Candace Ashcraft	Muskingum Valley Park District	Robert McFarland
Rick Ashcraft	Daniel Galbraith	Richard and Nancy Montgomery
Brian and Cindy Montgomery	Mrs. J. Warren Healea	Philander Chase Conservancy
Allison L. Montgomery,	James and Martha McDonald	R. E. Simpson
Trustee of the Montgomery Family	Michael and Abby Shipley	John and Rebecca Simpson
Preservation Trust	John and Donna Horn	Harold Rine
Brad and Melinda Lanker	Jeff Montgomery	David and Harriet Schwartz
Curtis Bechtel	W. Jerry Simpson	Earl and Kelly Holbrook
Marion Brill	Janet Kohr	Ian and Charlotte Watson
James and Maureen Buchwald	Arc of Appalachia	Bruce Williams
Buxton Farms, Ltd.	Bruce and Kathy Lanker	Jay Wilson
Alan and Traci Cassell	Jeff and Pat Wells	Chris and Julia Bunner
City of Mount Vernon	Dalton and Norma Magers	Laura S. Aring, Trustee of
Bernice Delong	Dustin and Tara Durbin	the Bunner Preservation Trust

Legend:

Easement Grantors (original easement holders) in black  
and Successor Grantors (subsequent owners) in green

## Meet the New Trustees



**Harlow Walker** is a Licensed Professional Counselor and maintains his role as a private practice lawyer and mediator, boasting over 30 years of experience. Before this, he served for 12 years as an Officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. After his service, Harlow returned to Knox County to settle on part of his family's farm, where he and his wife, Christine, initiated a reforestation project 25 years ago by planting 10,000 hardwood and spruce trees. They cherish spending time outdoors with their three adult children and six grandchildren, enjoying activities such as hiking, kayaking, biking, and traveling. Harlow's favorite mantra for well-being is: "If you're not outside, you're separated from reality."

**Bob Gunther** was born and raised in southwest Minnesota and grew up in a farming family, with his father also working as a rural mail carrier. Earning a degree from Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) he started his career at an independent insurance agency in Marshall, MN. Over the next 42 years, he built a successful career in the insurance and banking sectors, even serving as the President/CEO of a small community bank in his hometown for over a decade. Throughout his professional journey, he's been active on various local and statewide boards related to insurance and banking, and local and regional economic development boards too. Retired in December 2019, he stepped down from his role with the SMSU Foundation after three decades of service. In July 2018, he and his wife, Jill McCartney, relocated to Gambier as Jill began her position at Kenyon College. He currently holds the position of Secretary for the Rotary Club of Mount Vernon, is a proud member of Pheasants Forever, and enjoys spending time outdoors, and supporting Kenyon sports. He is the father of two adult children who reside in Minnesota.



## Board, Advisors and Staff

### Trustees

Kim Davidson, 2023~2026, President  
Carol Detmer, 2022~2025  
Bob Gunther, 2024~2027  
Harry Itagaki, 2022~2025, Vice President  
Mike O'Neill, 2023~2026  
Greg Spaid, 2022~2025, Secretary  
Marcie Steen, 2022~2025  
Todd Vermilya, 2022~2025, Treasurer  
Harlow Walker, 2024~2027  
Beth Waller, 2023~2026  
Kyle Walls, 2023~2026  
Jeff Wells, 2023~2026, Land Steward

### Advisors

Guy Denny  
Doug Givens  
Howard Gratz  
Ray Heithaus  
Mark Leonard  
Sally Nelson  
Gordy Yance

### Staff

Executive Director  
Vicki Kauffman  
Assistant  
Jodie Phelan



# Treasurer's Analysis of 2023 Results

Annual Gathering ~ June 23rd, 2024

In the fiscal year 2023, Owl Creek Conservancy received a total of \$413,644 in gifts and contributions. The organization faced increased fixed expenses in 2023, primarily due to a higher number of easement acquisitions and the cost associated with hiring a part-time Administrative Assistant.

Investment markets proved beneficial for Owl Creek Conservancy in 2023, leading to unrealized gains of \$367,278 in the portfolio of funds with the market value up for the year \$453,948. To support anticipated activities for the year, \$106,500 was withdrawn.

Currently, over 5,600 acres are preserved through 48 easements. The Stewardship Fund holds reserves of \$378,603, equating to \$67.41 per acre or \$7,887 per easement.

The 2024 Budget reflects an increase in wages and related payroll costs, as well as an expectation of higher expenses for Easement Acquisitions, despite no new easements closing so far this year. With these expected activities, further distributions from the funds are planned.

To date, the investment market remains favorable for Owl Creek Conservancy, with unrealized gains from the four funds reaching a total of \$191,156 in 2024.

## Owl Creek Conservancy Funds at the Knox County Foundation

	12/31/2022	12/31/2023	Increase (Decrease)
Conservation Easement Acquisition Fund	266,167.23	284,435.88	18,268.65
Endowment Fund	1,582,440.41	1,966,965.56	384,525.15
Stewardship Fund	340,965.13	357,190.83	16,225.70
Memorial Fund	280,926.72	315,584.72	34,658.00
<b>Total Funds</b>	<b>\$ 2,470,499.49</b>	<b>\$ 2,924,176.99</b>	<b>\$ 453,677.50</b>
<b>Source of Gains</b>			
Investment Returns			367,278.89
Contributions			149,125.00
New Philanthropy Gift Matches			65,000.00
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>\$ 581,403.89</b>
<b>Expenses &amp; Contributions</b>			
Administrative Expenses			20,956.39
Grants Awarded			106,500.00
Other Expenses			-
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>\$ 127,456.39</b>
<b>Net Gain (Loss)</b>			<b>\$ 453,947.50</b>



## Treasurers's Report

	FYE 2022	FYE 2023	YTD May 2024
<b>Income</b>			
Membership Dues	37,801	27,450	63,925
Gifts/Contributions	366,051	413,421	164,790
Grants	59,405	223	-
Card Sales	372	20	-
Investment Income	841	9,164	2,919
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$ 464,470</b>	<b>\$ 450,278</b>	<b>\$ 231,634</b>
<b>Cost of Goods Sold</b>			
Cards	193	390	-
<b>Gross Profit</b>	<b>\$ 464,277</b>	<b>\$ 449,888</b>	<b>\$ 231,634</b>
<b>Expenses</b>			
Grants	-	-	250
Salaries & Wages	45,320	52,140	28,000
Employee Benefits	5,350	5,350	3,349
Payroll Taxes	4,056	4,587	-
Management	4,174	8,273	-
Accounting	4,700	10,509	2,010
Investment Management	19,761	20,956	6,444
Other	30	87	8
Advertising	747	6,813	2,285
Office	6,488	8,023	276
Occupancy	873	596	893
Insurance	5,458	4,721	4,029
Easement Acquisition	91,449	221,462	315
Monitoring	11,073	1,953	4,312
Education	6,984	-	-
Membership Dues	1,674	2,200	550
Fundraising	-	-	264
Miscellaneous	2,066	2,700	63
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 210,203</b>	<b>\$ 350,370</b>	<b>\$ 53,048</b>
<b>Net Gain (Loss) for Period</b>	<b>\$ 254,074</b>	<b>\$ 99,518</b>	<b>\$ 178,586</b>

# Life Members

We are pleased to introduce nine new Life Members for 2024.  
We appreciate their commitment and extend our gratitude  
to all Life Members for their continued support of the Conservancy.

Matt & Candace Ashcraft**	Bert & Susan Hendley	Steve Oster
Richard Ashcraft****	John & Donna Horn +	Philander Chase Conservancy *
Kimberly Davidson & Richard Barker	Jane Huntington	Mary McManus & L. Keith Plocki
Heather Schooler & Steven Barr	Lisa Gichner & Harry Itagaki	Patricia Donohoue & C.C. Porter
Barbara Barry	Jeff & Vicki Kauffman	Ken & Jan Reynolds
Curtis Bechtel+	Janet L. Kohr 4	Harold A. Rine *
Marion R. Brill 1	Emerson Laird	Howard & Judy Sacks
Janet Brunka	Brad & Melinda Lanker *	Florence Short
Maureen Buchwald **	Kathy Lanker ****	W. Jerry Simpson *
Barry Buxton +	Jane Cowles & Dan Laskin	John & Rebecca Simpson
Alan & Traci Cassell **	William Lawhon, Jr.	Greg & Susan Spaid
Laura Chatfield	Mark & Pam Leonard	Ann Stallard
John & Abbe Cheek	Robert L. McFarland 5	Richard & Joan Stallard
William de Camp, Jr.	Robert Meier	Jim & Marcie Steen
Beth Waller & Jay Dorsey	Ed Meyers	Dennis & Tamara Swingle
John & Gayle Dowalter	Charles & Julie Michelson	John & Debbie Urton
Judith Fisher	Beverly Morse & Brian Miller	Ian & Charlotte Watson*
Daniel W. Galbraith *****2,6	Brian & Cindy Montgomery +	Dianna & Richard D. Wetzel, Jr.
Jim & Kim Giles	Jeffery L. Montgomery *	Peter White
Douglas & Susan Givens	Richard & Nancy Montgomery ****+++	Anna Williams+
Howard & Sarah Gratz	Doug & Beth Morgan	S. Bruce Williams+
Carolyn Hahnemann	Greg & Vicki Mountz	Jay M. Wilson *
Robert & Cornelia Hallinan	Muskingum Valley Park District	John & Cyndi Woollam
Mrs. J. Warren Healea 3	Joe & Sally Nelson	Karen B. Wright
Ray & Pat Heithaus	Marc & Jen Odenweller	Gordon & Fran Yance

## Legend:

Blue – New Life Member in 2024

\* One conservation easement donated in full or in part

+ One agricultural easement donated in part (co-holder Ohio Department of Agriculture)

1 Conservation easement donated in memory of Patty Markee Brill

2 Conservation easement donated in memory of Mary Lucile Cooper Galbraith

3 Two conservation easements donated in memory of J. Warren Healea

4 Conservation easement donated in memory of Robert Duncan McKenzie

5 Conservation easement donated in memory of Georgia Z. and Robert O. McFarland

6 Conservation easement donated in memory of Howard Milton Galbraith



Photo: Vicki Kauffman, Galbraith I Easement



**Memorial Contributions since June of 2023  
made in memory of**

**William Brunka  
Margaret and Clay Hoskins  
Edith Laird  
Gina Lyn Zak**