

Friends of the Kankakee

Program Area:

Natural Areas Program

County:

Iroquois

Grantee:

Friends of the Kankakee

Grant Date:

October 2012

Grant Amount:

87500

Location:

Unincorporated Beaverville, IL 60912



The Foundation awarded a grant to Friends of the Kankakee, a not-for-profit organization, to support the acquisition of multiple parcels totaling 33 acres with a range of native habitat, including black oak savanna, sand prairie, remnant flatwoods and restorable flatwoods. The land is located in the northeast corner of Iroquois County in an area known as Willow Estates. This largely undeveloped subdivision connects the state-dedicated Hooper Branch Savanna Nature Preserve and the 2,000-acre Iroquois State Fish and Wildlife Area in Illinois with the nearly 10,000-acre Willow Slough State Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana. The all-volunteer group has been working to establish this link since 2003 and owns and manages almost 230 acres of natural habitat within the Kankakee Sands area. The organization's ultimate goal is to transfer the natural areas to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the creation of the bi-state Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. The target parcels contain 239 native plant species as well as several species of concern, including 8 state-listed plants and 2 state-listed animals, the regal fritillary butterfly and ornate box turtle. The regal fritillary (*Speyeria idalia*) can be found in tall-grass prairies or wet grassy areas in

the Central U.S., however, due to habitat loss and fragmentation is now listed as threatened in Illinois. The Foundation's grant will be applied towards the direct cost of the land.



What's new with this Project? To date, the grantee has purchased 25 of the target parcels under this grant project totaling almost 12 acres. Land acquisition is the first step towards achieving the group's ultimate objective - the creation of the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. Since the grant was awarded, Friends of the Kankakee's commitment to this goal has been bolstered by some renewed interest on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the refuge. Other steps the group takes in the interim to ensure the long-term protection of the natural habitat it acquires include managing the land to create an environment where a diverse array of native species can thrive and enrolling those parcels that qualify in the land protection programs administered by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC). During the upcoming field season, volunteers will be actively working to improve the properties acquired with the help of Foundation grant funds by conducting species inventories, distributing seed, removing invasive plants, and picking up debris. In addition, Friends of the Kankakee will continue to coordinate with the INPC, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy on efforts to improve the natural habitat of what is a landscape-scale natural area that spans both county and state lines. One sign of the success of the collective acquisition and restoration efforts to date is the now regular sightings of the federally-endangered Whooping Crane within the larger Kankakee Sands complex of protected lands as it stops to feed and rest during its migration from Wisconsin to Florida and back. Originally led by an ultralight aircraft, the young are now being led by adult Whooping Cranes.

