“Adopt the pace of nature. Her secret is patience.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson
A Gift From The Heart

As a nonprofit, we are blessed with so many gifts. Our volunteers regularly donate their time and talents to help us serve our community. Our members and donors contribute the financial support necessary to sustain and build our mission and operations. Our Board of Trustees provides the leadership and fiduciary oversight that safeguards our assets now and into the future. And, our staff often goes the extra mile to make sure we are protecting and effectively utilizing all of these gifts. These people, these gifts, and these efforts—they not only make Pierce Cedar Creek Institute possible, they make it an amazing place to be!

Recently a personal and special gift from the heart came our way. Kensinger and Alice Jones, neighbors, friends, and supporters of the Institute even before the Institute was built, gifted their home and 153 acres of property on Aurohn Lake, which happens to be the first property in Barry County protected through a conservation easement with Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, to the Institute. Kensinger passed away in 2015, but Alice made their gift final this February when she decided to move into an assisted living facility and transfer her home and property deed to the Institute.

Many have heard the story of how the Institute came to be. Bill Pierce and his two sons, Gary and Joe, were visiting Ken and Alice one day. Sitting on the back deck of their home, Bill began to dream of a place like theirs where everyone could come and enjoy the beauty and learn about the wonders nature provides. Alice suggested purchasing property next to theirs owned by Dr. Lew Batts, an ardent conservationist, founder of the Kalamazoo Nature Center, and professor at Kalamazoo College. Shortly after this conversation, the property was purchased, and the dream of the Institute was born.

I first met Ken and Alice when I became executive director of the Institute in 2001. On early visits to their house, Ken and Alice would ask how the Institute was doing, how I was doing, and then Ken would say, “What can I do for you?” and he truly was asking how he could help. I’d hear snippets of their amazing life, living all over the world, meeting celebrities, hosting guests from around the world, all shared without pretense. And, I believe, through Alice’s strong and resolute appreciation and commitment to the natural world, I began to learn what their home on Aurohn Lake meant to them.

Those blessed to know Alice Jones know she is an amazing woman—strong and wise, she was committed to her husband and continues to be committed to her family, her community, her beliefs, and nature. She no longer lives on the 153 acres she and Ken made their home a half century ago, but she knows the property will be cared for and loved by Pierce Cedar Creek Institute for generations to come. Just as Bill Pierce’s dream of protecting and sharing the joys of the natural world became a reality with a visit to a friend in the country, I believe Alice’s hope is that someday, others’ dreams of sharing the joys of nature will become reality on that same 153 acres. A true gift from the heart.
Local Conservation Efforts

Habitat Improvement Made Possible Through Partnership

With its long list of enhancement and restoration projects, the Institute’s stewardship department finds it easy to keep busy. However, some worthwhile projects have to be put on hold because the Institute simply does not have the equipment or funds to complete them alone. Fortunately, the Institute has the ability to partner with other organizations to work on these projects and sites of high conservation importance. One recent example of this type of work is a project being done in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) through their Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to reduce woody encroachment in the Institute’s open uplands. The purpose of this USFWS program is to provide technical and financial assistance to landowners inspired to enhance or restore wildlife habitat on their property.

The program is flexible in that projects are tailored to the landowner’s goals, allowing them to utilize the land but maintain it to provide quality habitat and food for a variety of wildlife species. This flexibility works well for farmers and ranchers who rely on their property but can do so in a way that the land remains a resource for game and non-game animals. Other private landowners also benefit from the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program as most properties have some degradation that would be improved through this valuable partnership. This voluntary program lasts a minimum of 10 years, during which the landowner does not forfeit any property rights or allow public access. The program is intended to be a true partnership between the landowner and the USFWS, meaning that a landowner also invests a share of time and funds towards the habitat improvements. Projects with the potential to enhance or restore habitat for threatened, endangered, or rare species are given priority.

The mission of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, to focus on areas of conservation concern, fits well with the Institute’s goal to increase suitable habitat for its eastern massasauga rattlesnake populations. This project enhances approximately seven acres of upland habitat adjacent to wetlands that are valuable basking habitat for the eastern massasauga rattlesnake. The habitat improvements in this area include planting with native prairie plants that also greatly benefit pollinators and migratory birds. Prior to this project, this land supported very little in the way of food resources for these animals.

The project was designed in partnership with USFWS biologist Tom Eitniear, who provided technical assistance on the project. USFWS also provided financial resources for Dennis Marshall of Dragline Works out of Stockbridge, MI to complete the grinding of the woody shrub species that included invasive autumn olive, multiflora rose, and black locust. The Institute stewardship staff is responsible for raking the remaining woody debris from the open areas, seeding the site with native wildflowers, and maintaining the open areas by treating regrowth of the woody species. The impact of these habitat improvements should be noticeable, even in this first growing season.

The woody species being managed against are common invaders that can be seen taking over native habitat throughout our region and beyond. Autumn olive is a deciduous shrub with alternate, lance-shaped leaves that are silvery underneath and can grow 20 feet tall. It produces abundant small fruits spread by birds, and its rapid growth rate crowds out native species. Black locust is a deciduous tree with alternate, pinnately-compound leaves with small leaflets and branches with spines; it can grow between 30 – 80 feet tall. It prevents the growth of native ground vegetation and desirable tree species. Multiflora rose is a perennial shrub whose stems are multi-branched with large curved thorns. It can grow up to 10 feet tall. This plant spreads rapidly and creates an impenetrable thicket, which inhibits native vegetative growth and can also restrict wildlife movement for water and food resources.

Removing these invasive species and supporting the growth of native plant species should support more usage by wildlife species, including the eastern massasauga rattlesnake, a federally threatened species. An exciting aspect of improving this habitat is the long-term data the Institute and its research partners have collected that suggests this is an important area within the eastern massasauga rattlesnake home range. The Institute looks forward to having researchers complete more surveys in the following years to look at how this restoration work affects the movement of snakes within the improved habitats. We also look forward to sharing this project’s success with others to inspire them to work on enhancing or restoring land to be productive for wildlife.

Stay tuned for updates on this project!
Dragonflies: Visionaries of the Skies

Skimmers. River Cruisers. Clubtails. Spiketails. These are all words used to describe dragonflies, a common summer sight along Michigan’s waterways. There are more than 5,000 known species of dragonflies worldwide, and about 100 species live in Michigan. Dragonflies play an important role in their ecosystems as voracious insect predators—a single dragonfly eats hundreds of mosquitos per day—and as a food source for larger animal species such as fish, frogs, and birds.

Like frogs, dragonflies lead a dual life. Dragonfly nymphs can live for several years in ponds, lakes, streams, rivers, and swamps before emerging to live only a few months as adults. Unlike butterflies or moths that spin chrysalises or cocoons to change into their adult form, dragonfly nymphs crawl out of the water and molt their skin one last time before becoming adults with fully functional wings.

To a gnat, mosquito, or other small insect, dragonflies are simply terrifying. Few species in the animal kingdom can match their flying ability. These expert aerialists have four wings attached to their body by distinct muscles that can work each wing independently, allowing them to change the angle of each wing separately. Dragonflies are able to hover, fly backwards and upside down, dive, pivot 360 degrees in mid-flight, and reach speeds of 30 miles per hour. Dragonflies also are true “visionaries.” Most of their head is covered with enormous compound eyes, which gives them nearly 360 degree vision; their only blind spot is directly behind them. These amazing flight and vision capabilities are two reasons they are one of the world’s most effective hunters, catching their prey 9 out of 10 times. They do not just chase down their prey; they can judge their prey’s speed and trajectory, adjust their flight, and then ambush their prey mid-air. A dragonfly can be missing an entire wing and still capture prey!

Even though dragonflies are a fairly common sight in Michigan, there are eleven species of state special concern, two state threatened species, and one state-and federally-listed endangered species, the Hines emerald. Dragonflies are such an important symbol of Michigan’s waterways that last year a 4-H group from Springport convinced their Michigan legislator to introduce a bill to designate the green darner dragonfly as Michigan’s official state insect. As the Great Lakes state and one of only two states without a state insect, the youth felt the dragonfly perfectly fit Michigan’s identity—what do you think?

Learn how to identify dragonflies and damselflies during the Virtual BioBlitz Hike on July 16 or the Virtual Stroll with Nature on July 22; see page 5 for more information.
Wander through the Institute’s Natural Communities

The Institute is home to several of the 77 natural communities found throughout the state. Summer is the perfect time to explore them, especially the cedar swamp, the oak savanna, and the sand prairie, three of the most unique communities on the property.

The cedar swamp, also called a rich conifer swamp, is a groundwater-fed wetland that develops on organic soils and is often associated with lakes and groundwater-fed streams. Although common in the upper Lower Peninsula and Upper Peninsula, they are rare in the southern Lower Peninsula. Cedar trees are short coniferous trees, growing up to 70 feet, with shallow roots. Other plant species found in the Institute’s cedar swamp are tamarack trees, liverworts, ferns, orchids, sedges, mosses, showy lady slipper, Jack-in-the-pulpit, marsh marigold, and water horsetail. Beavers also call the cedar swamp home.

A sand prairie, sometimes called a dry sand prairie, is an ecosystem typically found on sandy, nutrient-poor soils. These areas are prone to frequent fires, droughts, and late season frosts that prevent many trees from growing. The vegetation is typically pretty short and sparse with some areas of bare soil being common. Common sand prairie plant species include little and big bluestem, sedges, wild strawberry, goldenrods, butterfly milkweed, wild lupine, smooth pussytoes, switch grass, purple love grass, prairie smoke, hairy puccoon, horsemint, blue toadflax, prickly pear cactus, New Jersey tea, lichens, and mosses. The Institute’s sand prairie likely was once an oak opening that became degraded over time.

Oak savannas are open woodlands with large trees scattered throughout a rich diversity of wildflowers and grasses. The dominant tree species, all of which are adapted to fire, are oaks, especially bur oak and white oak, and hickories, particularly shagbark hickory. Other plant species include little and big bluestem, hog peanut, milkweeds, rattlesnake master, wild strawberry, sunflowers, wild bergamot, goldenrods, smooth pussytoes, switch grass, purple love grass, prairie smoke, hairy puccoon, horsemint, blue toadflax, prickly pear cactus, New Jersey tea, lichens, and mosses. The Institute’s sand prairie likely was once an oak opening that became degraded over time.

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A view of a future oak savanna near the Little Grand Canyon taken during one of the Institute’s volunteer work days in 2019.
Wednesday, July 8  10 – 11 am  
Learn how and why fireflies light up the night sky through stories, hands-on activities, and suggestions for short “strolls” on trails or through your neighborhood. Open to all ages, this program is geared towards preschoolers through elementary students. Free (donations accepted)

Virtual Coffee Talk: A Caricature of an Artist  
Thursday, July 9  10 – 11 am  
"Drawing is always cool—no matter what your age or background," says Grand Rapids ArtPrize Winner Chris LaPorte of Aquinas College, who has drawn caricatures and portraits of almost 100,000 people over that last 20 years. Join him as he recounts his inspiration and the common thread that connects his subjects, his audience, and his life. Although open to all ages, this talk is geared towards upper middle school students through adults. Free (donations accepted)

Science Storytime: Freshwater Fish Fables  
Tuesday, July 14  10:30 – 11:15 am  
Join us to hear some fishy tales, sing songs, and engage in play and hands-on activities while learning about the fish and other creatures that swim in Michigan’s waters in this storytime hosted by the Hastings Public Library and Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. Although open to all ages, this storytime is geared towards toddlers through early elementary. Free (donations accepted)

Virtual BioBlitz Hike: Dragonflies and Damselflies  
Thursday, July 16  4 – 5 pm  
Learn techniques for observing dragonflies and damselflies, their identifying characteristics across multiple life stages, and differences in their foraging and perching behaviors. After the presentation, participants be given the tools to go outside and try to identify and record their observations through smartphone apps and online reporting. Free (donations accepted)

Virtual Stroll with Nature: Dragonflies—Fantastic Flyers  
Wednesday, July 22  10 – 11 am  
Discover the secret world of dragonflies through stories, hands-on activities, and suggestions for short “strolls” on trails or through your neighborhood. Although open to all ages, this program is geared towards preschoolers through elementary students. Free (donations accepted)

Beginner’s Botanical Drawing: A Guide to Poisonous Plants  
Wednesday, July 22  7 – 9:30 pm  
In the natural world, beauty can also be dangerous. Join Dayna Walton of Solstice Handmade to explore the basics of botanical drawing with pen and ink and poisonous plant identification in the comfort of your home! All supplies needed to make your own poisonous plants guide will be mailed to you. Register by July 10 to ensure your supplies arrive in time; international participants, please register by July 3. Space is limited to 35 participants. Members $30 | Non-Members $40

Virtual Lunch and Learn:  
Wind Blows, Sand Moves, and Plants Adjust—The Ecology and Biodiversity of Lake Michigan’s Coastal Dunes  
Thursday, July 23  Noon – 1 pm  
Michigan coastal sand dunes provide habitat for many plants and animals. Join Assistant Professor of Geological and Environmental Science at Hope College Suzanne DeVries-Zimmerman’s discussion of dune ecology and biodiversity, specific adaptations of species living in these areas, and the impact of fluctuating lake levels on the dune’s unique flora and fauna communities. Free (donations accepted)

Science Storytime: Stellar Stars and Cosmic Constellations  
Tuesday, July 28  10:30 – 11:15 am  
Hear stories, sing songs, and engage in play and hands-on activities while learning about stories the stars tell us in this storytime hosted by the Hastings Public Library and Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. Although open to all ages, this storytime is geared towards toddlers through early elementary. Free (donations accepted)