

# Partnerships, Planning, and Persistence:

Collaborative Approaches Aid Three Ice Age Trail Acquisitions

CASE STUDIES | SUMMER 2020



Photo Credit: Gary Werner



Partnership for the National Trails System

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#### BEST PRACTICES

This case study highlights the importance of partnerships and using different and innovative approaches to complete gaps in trail conservation to secure safe, off-road routes for national scenic trails.

#### PROJECT PARTNERS

- Dane County—Dane County Conservation Fund
- Groundswell Conservancy
- Ice Age Trail Alliance
- National Park Service
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

#### KEY TERMS

- Natural Resource Protection
- Trail Protection
- Working with Land Trusts
- Working with Local and State Agencies

## Department of Transportation Strategic Goal Alignment



#### INFRASTRUCTURE

These trail protection projects help to fill in gaps in the connectivity of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, and will provide an outdoor recreation experience worthy of a national scenic trail for the public to enjoy.



#### INNOVATION

These unique solutions to protecting land are the culmination of years of work by multiple partners using different tools to conserve each property.



#### SAFETY

These key acquisitions will allow the Ice Age Trail Alliance to move the Ice Age National Scenic Trail off of high-speed roads to pastoral and forested landscapes, significantly reducing the potential for crashes involving hikers and motorists.

## About the Partnership for the National Trails System

#### MISSION

To empower, inspire, and strengthen public and private partners to develop, preserve, promote, and sustain the national scenic and historic trails.

#### VISION

PNTS envisions a world-class system of national scenic and historic trails that preserves natural and cultural values and provides recreational benefits for all.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of PNTS is to promote and support the efforts of national scenic and historic trail organizations, to secure public and private resources, and to serve as a collective voice for policy and action that supports national scenic and historic trails.





Photo Credit: Kevin Thusius, Ice Age Trail Alliance

**Above:** The view from atop Mammoth’s Back Preserve looking over Black Earth Creek where, just beyond, the great ice sheet stopped and retreated. The flat land surrounding the hill is glacial outwash—stratified sand and gravel up to 300 feet thick deposited by the floods unleashed as the ice sheet melted about 18,000 years ago. The outwash fills the Black Earth Creek valley and provides a porous aquifer that stores and releases groundwater, keeping the creek flowing year-round and cool so that it is a self-reproducing trout stream renowned nationally for anglers.

## 40 Years of Partnerships

by **DON OWEN, Trail Protection Specialist, Partnership for the National Trails System**

**T**he Ice Age Trail Alliance (IATA) has been working with its partners for nearly 40 years to protect the Ice Age National Scenic Trail in Wisconsin. “Protecting a 1,200-mile contiguous trail is a daunting and extremely ambitious effort,” said Kevin Thusius, IATA’s Director of Land Conservation. “It’s vital that the Ice Age Trail Alliance work collaboratively with our public and private partners to secure trail rights to complete this amazing project. We have to find common ground with partners, advocate for funding and other support, and negotiate with multiple parties so that all partners have a stake in a successful outcome.”







Photo Credit: Samantha Haas, Partnership for the National Trails System

**Above:** The Ice Age Trail Alliance headquarters is located adjacent to the Ice Age National Scenic Trail in downtown Cross Plains in Dane County, WI.

Dane County, where the Ice Age Trail Alliance's office is located, is at the epicenter of this decades-long trail protection effort. And just in the last six months, IATA and its partners have completed three important conservation projects in the county along one of the most popular stretches of the entire Ice Age National Scenic Trail, closing long-standing gaps where hikers previously had to walk on the shoulder of county and town roads.

In each case, IATA assembled a different team of partners to get the job done. The end result is a continuous corridor of conserved land that will allow IATA to move the trail off of high-speed roads to pastoral or more remote landscapes, significantly reducing the potential for crashes involving hikers and motorists.

The first of these projects, a 46-acre parcel called Mammoth's Back, was purchased outright by IATA. The second, a five-acre fee acquisition completed by Groundswell Conservancy, helped IATA close the first purchase. And the third, a right-of-way and conservation easement across 152 acres of rural farmland, was purchased by Dane County. In each case, IATA played a different role to fill in the gaps in available resources and help get the job done.

*“ It’s vital that the Ice Age Trail Alliance work collaboratively with our public and private partners to secure trail rights to complete this amazing project. We have to find common ground with partners, advocate for funding and other support, and negotiate with multiple parties so that everyone has a stake in a successful outcome. ”*

- Kevin Thusius, Ice Age Trail Alliance

# Ice Age Trail Alliance Protects 46-acre Mammoth’s Back Preserve

IATA’s mission is straightforward: “The mission of the Ice Age Trail Alliance is to create, support, and protect a thousand-mile footpath tracing Ice Age formations across Wisconsin—the Ice Age National Scenic Trail.”



However, the organization’s approach to carrying out that mission is unusual among national scenic and historic trail organizations. In addition to being the primary nonprofit organization for management, maintenance, and promotion of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, IATA is a full-fledged land trust. In fact, it is the only nonprofit national trail organization that has been accredited—and recently reaccredited—by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. And what IATA accomplished at Mammoth’s Back is a prime example of its ability to carry out a key element of its mission: protecting the Ice Age Trail.

In February 2020, IATA completed the acquisition of Mammoth’s Back Preserve, a 46-acre property at the edge of the Glaciated and Driftless Regions in south-central Wisconsin. The acquisition of Mammoth’s Back provides much more than just a safe hiking experience. It also protects key features of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, including classic examples of unglaciated bedrock hills, a remnant prairie landscape, and productive farmland.

Thusius said that—consistent with IATA’s status as an accredited land trust—he and other IATA staff ensured that all steps in the acquisition process, from initial contact with the landowner through securing title insurance, appraisals, and survey to completing a purchase-and-sale agreement, closing, and recording the transaction, were conducted in compliance with the Land Trust Alliance’s *Land Trust Standards and Practices*.

Although IATA was the principle party for the transaction, funding was secured from a variety of different sources, including the local volunteer chapter of the IATA, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, the Dane County Conservation Fund, a local business owner, and dozens of private donors.

The property adjoins the Black Earth Creek Preserve, another property owned by IATA, which protects a renowned Class 1 trout stream. IATA plans to open the property as soon as safe parking and property boundary markers have been installed. The organization also will be constructing the new trail treadway on the property within the next two years. IATA also plans to restore portions of the landscape to prairie and oak savannas that will provide habitat for native plants, grassland birds, and Monarch butterflies.

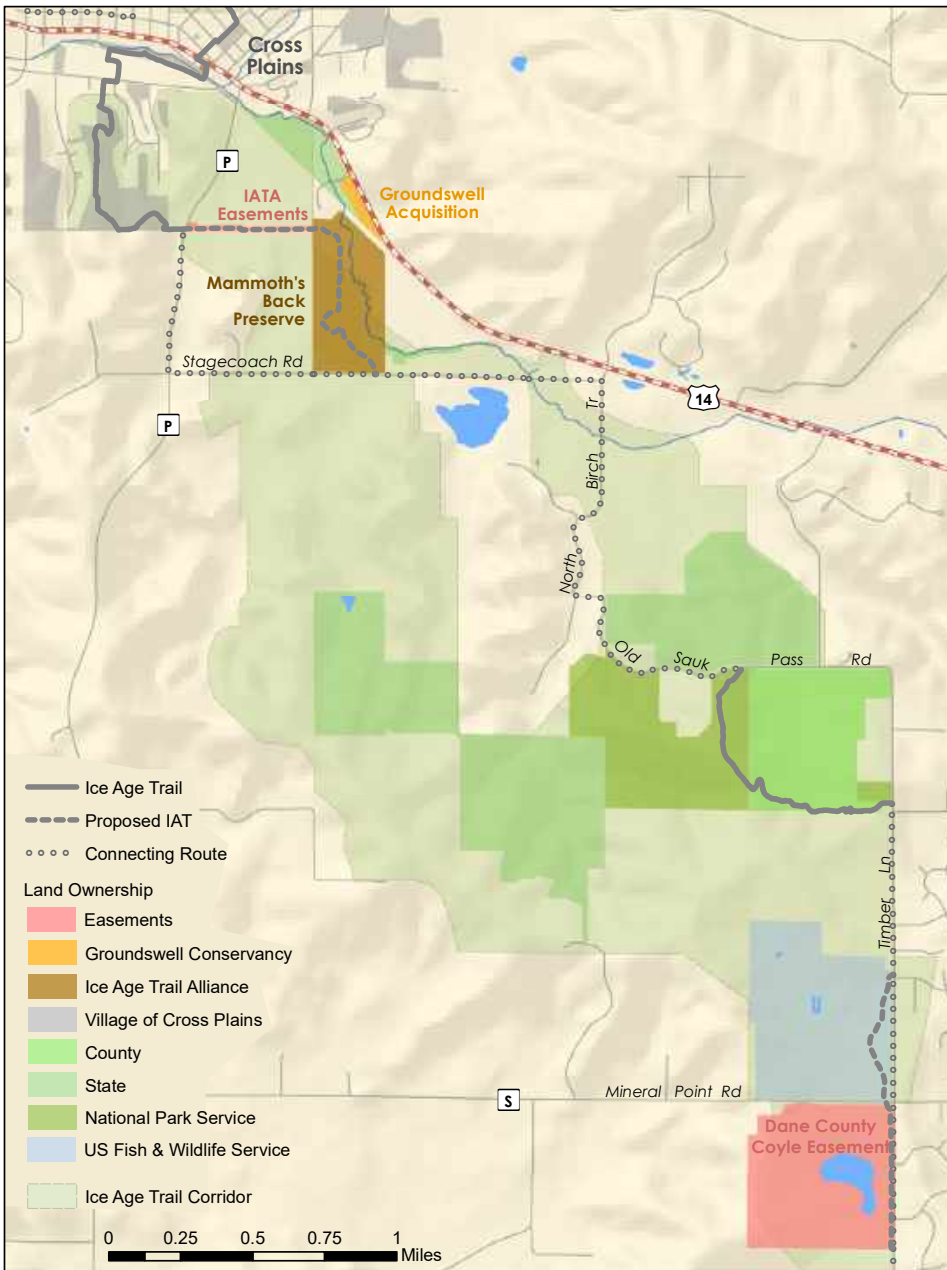


Photo Credit: Gary Werner, Ice Age Trail Alliance

The Mammoth’s Back Preserve (so named because its shape resembles the back of a mammoth) protects a variety of different features of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, including unglaciated bedrock hills, a remnant prairie landscape, and productive farmland.

**Above:** A late winter view of Mammoth’s Back from the southwest (at Stagecoach Road) showing the areas of prairie remnants amongst the encroaching cedar trees. **On the cover:** A summer view showing some of the agricultural land also acquired.





**Map Credit: National Park Service**

**Above:** The Ice Age National Scenic Trail, when completed, will be more than 1,200 miles long and cross Wisconsin north to south and east to west. These land acquisitions are located in Dane County in the southern part of the State.

**Map Credit: Tiffany Stram, Ice Age Trail Alliance**

**Left:** The Ice Age National Scenic Trail corridor in Dane County, Wisconsin, is a singular hiking experience made possible by an extraordinary patchwork of publicly and privately protected land.

## Groundswell Conservancy Facilitates Protection of Mammoth's Back

True to its name, the Ice Age Trail Alliance didn't protect Mammoth's Back on its own. Groundswell Conservancy, another nationally accredited land trust and longtime collaborator with the IATA, protected a key parcel in December 2019 that helped clear the estate of a portion of the Mammoth's Back Preserve property. The purchase also ensured that the 5.2-acre Frederick Festge property will eventually become part of the adjacent Black Earth Creek Fishery Area.



Groundswell Conservancy's mission is to protect special places forever. Their longterm goal is to convert agricultural land to prairie and convey the property to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to be managed as part of the Black Earth Creek Fishery Area. Groundswell Conservancy's acquisition helped IATA acquire the remainder of the Mammoth's Back Preserve without being encumbered by residential improvements or title issues. The Conservancy developed a very positive relationship with the family that owned the property, which established trust between the parties. This purchase also helped clear up some issues with the estate and access to and across the property.



Photo Credit: Gary Werner, Ice Age Trail Alliance

**Above:** The 152-acre Coyle Farm—with the perched pond and wetland—and a portion of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 175-acre Shoveler's Sink Waterfowl Production Area in Dane County. The Wisconsin glaciation terminal moraine is just east of Timber Lane, the road pictured here. Most of the land shown is within the purchase boundary of the Cross Plains Ice Age National Scientific Reserve.

## Dane County Protects 152 Acres of Farmland to Close a Critical Gap

In March 2020, Dane County completed a conservation easement on the 152-acre Coyle Farm just up the road from the Mammoth Back Preserve, closing another critical gap in the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. The Coyle Farm is a picturesque property—a classic Wisconsin family farm right beyond the glacial terminal moraine, and a perfect setting for a national scenic trail that highlights the remnants of Ice Age glaciation that shaped the State.

Negotiations with the Coyle family continued off and on since the 1990s, according to Thusius. “The Coyle Farm has been on the collective minds of all of the partners involved in protection of the Ice Age Trail for more than 25 years, when we first started our corridor planning process,” said Thusius. “All of us had a stake in the outcome—the nonprofit trail organization, Dane County, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the National Park Service.”

Thusius thought that the IATA's longterm, positive relationship with Dane County and other partners was the key. “We began with a public process called a Corridor Planning Process for Dane County,” he said. “This determined a very general, roughly mile-wide ‘opportunity corridor’ for the trail, within which we would look to acquire a protected route for the trail. The next step was a series of meetings, where we sat down with our partners and decided where the high priority areas were located, who the key landowners were, and which partner would take the lead role for contacting each landowner to seek

protection for the trail.”

Thusius continued, “With regard to the Coyle Farm, Dane County has always had the lead. Laura Hicklin, who represented the county through most of the easement process, had a good relationship with Mike Coyle, the landowner, who wanted more than anything to keep his farm and have his kids take over someday. Mike was looking for a deal that would give him the best chance of farming as long as he could, and the county was able to help him do it. While we had met with Mike on a number of occasions, which gave us a nice foundation to work from, the county really pulled this one through.”

Laura Hicklin, now Director of the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department, was happy to talk about the Coyle Farm easement. A lifelong resident of Wisconsin, she had known Mike Coyle for years. “The key for us was the strong political support of the Dane County Executive and Board of Supervisors. We are lucky that the county has structured our agency so that our department is known as the ‘Land and Water Resources Department,’” she said. “We work together with farmers and rural landowners to provide technical assistance, build our conversations with them around good land management practices and public access, and emphasize that good agricultural practices and natural ecosystem conservation can coexist and benefit everyone.”







Photo Credit: Kevin Thusius, Ice Age Trail Alliance

**Above:** Dane County representative Laura Hicklin and landowner Mike Coyle inspect crop rows on the Coyle Farm.

Hicklin said that the terms of the easement were drafted carefully to address Mike Coyle’s concerns, which included saving the farm, ensuring that public access for the Ice Age Trail wouldn’t affect agricultural operations, and discouraging trespass that had been occurring as people visited the remarkable perched pond on the property without permission. She said that the county agreed to a variety of technical provisions to ensure that Mr. Coyle could continue farming. The county also obtained a right of first refusal, which was built into the deed, and IATA committed to erecting signage and fencing to keep the public on the trail treadway, apart from farm operations.

The Coyle Farm easement provides a 30-foot right-of-way for the Ice Age Trail, as well as protection for a 14-acre pond and wetlands that complements the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Shoveler Sink Waterfowl Protection Area. In addition, the easement ensures permanent conservation of highly productive farmland. Dane County will manage the easement as part of the 1,700-acre Cross Plains Ice Age National Scientific Reserve, in partnership with IATA, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ultimately, the final details of the Coyle Farm easement were negotiated by Sharene Smith, Dane County’s Land and Water Resources Department Real Estate Coordinator, more than 25 years after the property was first identified for the Ice Age Trail and 12 years after Hicklin’s initial contact with Mike Coyle. In announcing the recording of the easement, Dane County Executive Joe Parisi said, “Dane County is committed to preserving our outdoor spaces so they can be enjoyed today, tomorrow, and for many years to come. These purchases allow us and our partners to restore Dane County’s natural resources and protect land with significant conservation benefits as our community continues to grow.”

“ *The key for us was the strong political support of the Dane County Executive and Board of Supervisors. We work together with farmers and rural landowners to provide technical assistance, build our conversations with them around good land management practices and public access, and emphasize that good agricultural practices and natural ecosystem conservation can coexist and benefit everyone.* ”

- Laura Hicklin, Dane County Land and Water Resources Department



## The Moral(s) of the Story

The moral(s) of the story?

First and foremost, partnerships work—and they are absolutely essential to successful trail protection efforts. Different partners bring different strengths to the table. Partnerships work best when everyone—including the nonprofit partner, local, State, and Federal agencies, land trusts, contributors of funding and expertise, and the private landowner—has a stake in a positive outcome.

Second, protecting a national scenic trail frequently requires many partners to step in and step up. Between the two termini of the Coyle Farm and the Mammoth Back Preserve, seven different trail partners hold title to properties that provide a continuous, protected route for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. This extraordinary patchwork of land ownership starts with a Dane County easement

across the street from a wildlife refuge managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and continues to a Dane County property, then across a parcel acquired and managed by the National Park Service, to a property managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, to IATA's Black Earth Creek and Mammoth's Back Preserves, to two IATA trail easements, and then finally onto Village of Cross Plains property. How creative can you get?

Last but not least, protecting land is a long game. While some land protection efforts can happen in a matter of months, many take years to complete, and the most challenging may take decades. Working together over the years establishes the trust among partners needed to complete complex projects. The end result is a national scenic trail protected in perpetuity, for present and future generations to enjoy.



Photo Credit: Kevin Thusius, Ice Age Trail Alliance

**Above:** View from atop the glacial moraine overlooking the agricultural landscape protected by the Dane County easement.

# Additional Insights on the Protection of the Ice Age Trail in Dane County

by GARY WERNER, Volunteer, Ice Age Trail Alliance

The purchase of the Mammoth's Back Preserve and the conservation easement on the Coyle Farm for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail are not unique, one-time events. Rather, they are the most recent results of a carefully nurtured, long-standing, congenial, and productive partnership with our local government.

This highly beneficial partnership with Dane County has been nurtured by numerous informal relationships and a consistent series of formal actions and agreements. The formal partnership began in 1985 when J.J. Werner, Chairman of the Ice Age Trail Council, asked Dane County Executive Jonathan Barry for help to support the work of the volunteers building the Ice Age Trail. Barry's response was to introduce a Dane County Board of Supervisors resolution supporting the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. The Board endorsed the resolution, which initiated a series of actions by Dane County over the ensuing three decades that have resulted in the county's purchase of 11 properties totaling 1,178 acres, as well as funding assistance that has enabled the Ice Age Trail Alliance to acquire another six properties (including the Mammoth's Back Preserve) conserving an additional 656 acres for the Ice Age Trail.

In the early 1990s, Jim Mueller, then the Dane County Parks Planner, worked with David Aslakson, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Planner, Pam Schuler, National Park Service

Planner, and Gary Werner, Dane County Coordinator for the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation (now the Ice Age Trail Alliance) to prepare the "Dane County Ice Age Trail Corridor Plan." This plan was adopted by the Dane County Board of Supervisors, the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, and the National Park Service in 1992. The plan formally established the route for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail through Dane County and made land purchases eligible for county funding by Dane County, as well as funding from the Wisconsin Stewardship Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. And ever since, the Ice Age National Scenic Trail corridor has been included in the series of five-year Dane County Parks and Open Space Plans that encourage additional protection for the Trail.

Over the past 30 years, members of the Dane County Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance (IATA) have worked continually to nurture and sustain this highly successful partnership with Dane County. They have cultivated enthusiastic support for the trail by all four elected Dane County Executives (Jonathan Barry, Rick Phelps, Kathleen Falk, and Joe Parisi) and the members of the Dane County Board of Supervisors. Chapter members have taken Dane County officials on hikes along the Ice Age Trail, included them in various events to better inform them of the benefits of the trail for county residents, and advised them on what they could do to help complete the trail. Chapter

members also have repeatedly testified for robust appropriations for the Dane County Conservation Fund and Dane County Parks during annual county budget hearings. In 1999, Dane County Chapter members worked with a coalition of citizen's groups to promote passage of a referendum authorizing \$30 million for the Conservation Fund over 10 years, with 76% of Dane County voters approving the initiative.

Besides building and maintaining trails, trained and experienced volunteers from the Dane County Chapter of the IATA also monitor and steward most of the land acquired by Dane County for the trail, which has relieved the county's Land and Water Resources Department staff of much of that responsibility. Dane County Chapter volunteers and Dane County staff also carry out similar land stewardship work, including control of invasive species and restoration of native prairie and oak savanna ecosystems, within several Dane County Parks through which the Ice Age Trail passes.

All of these actions have fostered an enduring public/private partnership, guided by a genuinely shared vision and land protection and management goals between Dane County and IATA staff and members. The result is a remarkable, scenic 55-mile corridor for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail through the heart of a county where 600,000 people live, work, and recreate.





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