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CONSERVANCY COMPLETES 556-ACRE CONSERVATION EASEMENT  
TO PROTECT CRITICAL BLANDING'S TURTLE HABITAT

The Geneva Lake Conservancy has completed a 556-acre conservation easement in northwest Walworth County that will protect critical habitat for several endangered species and species of concern in Wisconsin, including the Blanding's Turtle.

The property is owned by Ron Piening, a retired Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) employee, who began purchasing the parcels in the Towns of Darien and Richmond in 1965. The land includes more than 270 acres of woodland, a dozen kettle ponds and 240 acres of prime agricultural land.

"Unlike buildings, a legacy of land lasts forever," said Piening who has named the property the Holzinger Memorial Preserve after his father's family. "This conservation easement is a result of years of planning and will ensure that this land is preserved and restored for future generations."

Over the last 50 years, Piening has managed the property by planting hundreds of native and adventive trees and removing invasive species. He also operated a Christmas tree plantation on part of the property for more than 40 years.

The land is open to the public under the DNR's Voluntary Access Program. It is located on County Road M and Town Line Road, approximately four miles northwest of Delavan.

Under the conservation easement agreement, Piening and staff of the Geneva Lake Conservancy will develop a management plan to continue his restoration and afforestation program.

"We are very grateful that Mr. Piening has protected this property with high conservation value for the benefit of the public," said Kevin Brunner, Chairman of the Geneva Lake Conservancy. "The conservation easement will preserve critical wildlife habitat, protect unique glacial landscape and help conserve water quality in the Turtle Creek watershed."

The property provides habitat for the Blanding's Turtle, which is a species of concern in Wisconsin. The turtle can grow up to 10 inches in length and lives for more than 70 years. It has a long neck and

yellow chin and favors marshes, swamps and wet meadows. The Blanding's turtle overwinters in lakes and perennial ponds. Piening's property has been the subject of a study of the turtles by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee faculty.

The property is also in the critical habitat area for the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake, a threatened species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and a State Endangered Species. The massasauga is a small thick-bodied rattlesnake that lives in shallow wetlands and adjacent uplands of the Midwest. It is extremely shy and often rely on its brown coloration to avoid being detected.

The Conservancy staff will work with volunteers to continue to upgrade the habitat for these rare species as well as continue restoration of the woodlands, which includes remnant oak forest identified by a recent Chicago Wilderness/Morton Arboretum study.

"We want to build on all of the restoration work Mr. Piening has completed," said Karen Yancey, the Conservancy's Executive Director. "Mr. Piening's efforts to protect this important habitat is a gift to future generations and will help improve the ecological health of the area."

A conservation easement is a legal document that allows a private property owner to protect land from development in perpetuity, while offering significant income, estate and property tax benefits to the landowner.

The Geneva Lake Conservancy is a land trust accredited by the National Land Trust Alliance. Formed in 1977, the Conservancy's mission is to advocate for and preserve the waterways, natural areas and working lands of Walworth County. It has protected more than 2,700 acres in Walworth County and manages three nature preserves that are open to the public for hiking, fishing, cross country skiing, wildlife viewing and other recreational activities. For more information on the Geneva Lake Conservancy and maps of its public preserves, please go to [www.genevalakeconservancy.org](http://www.genevalakeconservancy.org).



The Holzinger Memorial Preserve provides habitat for the Blanding's Turtle, a species of concern in Wisconsin. Photo credit: USFWS.