



For immediate release

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GENEVA LAKE CONSERVANCY
RECEIVES ZABLER FARM DONATION

FONTANA, Wisconsin – The Geneva Lake Conservancy and Howard and Bev Zabler announced today that they have completed the donation of 61 acres of the Zabler family farm to the Geneva Lake Conservancy.

The Zabler farm is a well-established conservation farm located in the Village of Rochester in western Racine County. It is a part of a Primary Environmental Corridor and provides habitat for the Blanding's turtle, a state and federal endangered species, as well as numerous other wildlife.

Originally a family dairy farm, the third-generation of Zabler family owners, Howard and Bev Zabler, envisioned a full land restoration for the conservation of native species as their best stewardship of the land for restoring environmental health and maintaining ecosystems for wildlife. From 1996 to 1998, they restored the cropland to a 36-acre native Wisconsin prairie and 13 acres of wetland and planted 7,500 native species trees.

The Conservancy will continue to manage it as a private preserve with educational tours and fundraising events for the public at least four times a year. Howard and Bev Zabler continue to own the adjacent 16 acres that include the farmhouse, barn and other buildings. When the Zablers vacate that property, the 61 acres will be open to the public for hiking and wildlife viewing.



The Zabler prairie offers a beautiful view of coneflowers.



Lupines thrive in the Zabler prairie.

Howard's grandfather, Ernest Zabler, the son of August and Mary (Teut) Zabler, grew up in Rochester and bought this parcel of land in the early 1900's from the Oldenberg family to start his own dairy farm. His son, Wallace E. Zabler, who was born on the farm in 1914, joined the Navy in 1932 and became a WWII POW in Burma when his ship, the USS Houston, was sunk. He fortunately survived this ordeal and returned home in 1945 to marry his sweetheart, Donna Peck, the daughter of another local founding family and dairy farmer.

They bought Wallace's family farm in 1960, renting out the buildings and cropland, while maintaining the yard and planting over 50 trees there. His son, Howard, mowed the lawn and flagged the tree seedlings he sighted to mow around, raising 20 or so self-seeded trees to maturity. Wallace and Donna, moved to the farm in 1968 and stayed there through their retirement, with Howard joining them on college breaks and taking care of them in their final years. Howard and Bev began shared ownership of the land in 1992.

The property will be known as the Wallace E. Zabler Nature Preserve and a dedication of the preserve will be held in May 2021.

"Howard and Bev Zabler have been excellent caretakers of this scenic land and we are honored that they have entrusted us to continue this role," said Tom Nickols, vice chair of the Conservancy. "Their donation protects this land and its high conservation values for future generations and is an invaluable gift to the community.

The Conservancy has protected more than 2,800 acres of land in Walworth County and has expanded its mission to include the Burlington area. During a community conversation with Burlington residents in 2018, residents said they needed to protect more of the rural farms in the area from subdivision and development.

"The Zabler farm is an example of land with high conservation value that should not be developed," said Karen Yancey, the Conservancy's Executive Director. It is in the Honey and Sugar Creek watershed, one of the Conservancy's focus areas, and helps preserve the open lands in the charming community of Rochester, she said.

The Conservancy is working with other landowners in the Burlington/Rochester area to protect open lands with high conservation value.

The Geneva Lake Conservancy is a 43-year-old land trust that is accredited by the National Land Trust Alliance. It holds 35 conservation easements and owns 5 nature preserves that are open to the public. The Conservancy received the 2020 Wisconsin Land Trust of the Year award from Gathering Waters, the state land trust organization. For more information on its preserves and programs, go to www.genevalakeconservancy.org.

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