

Bohm Woods and the SIUE Nature Preserve: Valuable Conservation Assets for Southwestern Illinois



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Introduction

Madison County, located in southwestern Illinois along the Mississippi River near St. Louis, was historically characterized by a mosaic of diverse habitat types. This included rich bottomland and upland bluff forests, shrublands, wetlands, and a variety of prairie types. The diversity of habitat supported an equally diverse avifauna. Unfortunately, agriculture and urbanization have dramatically altered the landscape, replacing natural areas with crop monocultures, manicured lawns, buildings, roads, and parking lots. Today, the remaining habitat is highly fragmented and overrun with invasive plant and animal species.

Recently, there has been a concerted effort to identify and protect the few remaining areas of natural habitat in this region. In 2006, Bohm Woods was added to the Illinois Nature Preserve system. This 92-acre preserve was purchased by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources using funds from a settlement with Dynegy, Inc. over non-compliance with the Clean Air Act (Davis, 2006). While relatively small in size, Bohm Woods encompasses the highest quality old-growth forest

remaining in the region. The landscape is impressive, with loess hills interdigitated by networks of steep ravines, draining into a bottomland hardwood forest that is part of the Cahokia Creek floodplain. Massive hardwoods and a rich assemblage of understory vegetation offer native birds a degree of vertical complexity that is unusual for the region.

The 2660-acre campus of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) is located immediately to the south of Bohm Woods and includes some of the largest remaining forest patches in the area. These upland forests have a mixed disturbance history. The majority of forests on campus were agricultural land prior to development of the campus ~ 50 years ago. However, small areas of old growth persist in association with ravines.

In 2010, a faculty-led initiative resulted in designation of ~380 acres of undeveloped land along the western border of campus as the SIUE Nature Preserve. This protected area, located on the bluffs adjacent to the American Bottoms, was designed to serve as a habitat corridor (SIUE Edwardsville to Bohm Woods or "E2B corridor") linking the largest

forest patch on campus, ~150 acre Sweet William Woods, with Bohm Woods Nature Preserve. Corridors are valuable conservation tools that provide connectivity and an opportunity for gene flow for species in fragmented landscapes. The habitat corridor created by the SIUE Nature Preserve includes Sweet William Woods, a restored prairie known as Whiteside Prairie, and a wooded corridor, portions of which border 78-acre Cougar (Tower) Lake (Figure 1).

In 2008, thanks to the support of the Illinois Ornithological Society/Du Page Birding Club, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center, we initiated long-term monitoring of the bluff forest bird community in the two forest patches (Bohm and Sweet William Woods) joined by the corridor, as well as an additional forest patch (75-acre Bluebell Woods), located outside the corridor. We are particularly interested in monitoring species of conservation concern, such as the state threatened Cerulean Warbler, which has been occasionally observed in Bohm Woods, as well as on the SIUE campus. In addition to monitoring populations of resi-