

Weedman awarded for efforts to restore abandoned lot into natural paradise

By Laurie Lawlor

Jean Weedman is a remarkable leader, environmental educator and native plant enthusiast who has devoted more than a decade to create and sustain an impressive community effort: the Eagle Nature Trail located in southeastern Wisconsin in the small village of Eagle. A lifetime Wild Ones Kettle Moraine Chapter member, Weedman was awarded the 2022 Southeastern Wisconsin Invasive Species Consortium (SEWISC) Sweat Equity Award in November 2022 in acknowledgment of her energetic efforts at the trail site to restore prairie, woods and an ephemeral pond.

The story of the Eagle Nature Trail began in an inauspicious place — an overgrown, 8-acre municipal lot filled with garbage and invasive species. The tangle of buckthorn, box elder, dame's rocket and garlic mustard had become so thick over the years that no one knew what was inside the property located between Eagle Elementary and the Alice Baker Memorial Library.

But in autumn 2009, a group of volunteers decided to do something about the safety of students traveling by bike or on foot from school to the library. No sidewalk lined School Road, which was often busy and especially dangerous during icy winter conditions.

Why not cut a trail through the 8 acres? Once the trees were cleared, this place would be a perfect soccer field. A playground, someone else suggested. What about a garden with donated plants from people's yards?

Weedman, a veteran educator, had a bigger, better idea.

Fascinated by native plants since

the late 1980s, she decided to do a reconnaissance mission to see what was inside this forgotten wilderness. Just when she was about to give up, she later recalled, she made a surprising discovery. A single but spectacular purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and several scattered hoary vervains (*Verbena stricta*) with pencil-thin flowers.

These native plants might be proof that prairie once thrived here,



Elementary students head out with garbage bags to pull and remove invasive species on the Eagle Nature Trail property in 2019.

Weedman thought. Then along the edge of the trees was another surprise — two woodland natives, thimbleweed (*Anemone virginiana*) with its distinctive thimble-shaped seed heads turning cottony, and the unmistakable deep purple clusters of black elderberries (*Sambucus canadensis*).

Curious about what else might be discovered, she began to create a plant inventory for the committee that had been organized to create a

pathway. She returned to the vacant lot with Jerry Ziegler, who was a long-time, southeastern Wisconsin land steward with [The Nature Conservancy](#). As they made their way around litter and thick invasives, they suddenly heard something astonishing. Frog song. The sign of a healthy wetland. Something hidden still flourished here despite the land's neglect.

"The noise was a wonderful surprise," Weedman recalled.

Ziegler and Weedman hurried across soggy ground and found a clearing that held a rare form of wetland called an [ephemeral pond](#). This type of pond is home to fast-breeding amphibians and nearly microscopic creatures called fairy shrimp. Without a connection to a spring or a stream, an ephemeral pond depends on snowmelt and rain. Because ponds dry up in summer, they can't support fish. Without hungry fish, frog eggs have a chance to grow into tadpoles.

On their hike back that day, Weedman found more native woodland wonders: emerging Solomon's seal (*Maianthemum stellatum*) and the first unfolding heart-shaped leaves of blue and white violets (*Viola sororia* and *Viola canadensis*).

The abandoned lot was not a dead zone after all.

"Forensic" ecology research with soil charts, photos, early surveyor notes and aerial maps revealed that this piece of land was once part of a vast prairie with nearby oak openings and an ephemeral pond. Would it be possible to restore this place to its former health, beauty and diversity?

Now the hard work began —

convincing the committee, coming up with a mission statement and a new plan to showcase three restored, interdependent ecosystems.

Weedman was undaunted, despite having only a bare-bones budget and a loosely affiliated group of community volunteers. The Eagle Nature Trail, however, began to take shape. A growing network of supporters — everyone from local volunteer firefighters, principals, high school and college students and Boy Scouts — pitched in to clear invasives, cut buckthorn, grade the trail

and plant native prairie, woodland and wetland species.

Native restoration is local, hopeful work that requires “sweat equity” of the most important kind. Through it all, Weedman helped lead, manage, inspire and push ongoing maintenance and stewardship with help from many different people and in-kind donations from a wide range of businesses.

Today the Eagle Nature Trail serves as a pathway between the local elementary school and library. The trail also helps connect artists and

citizen scientists, community readers and explorers, teachers, students and their peers as an outdoor classroom.

“Sometimes restoration work seems like a long, slow slog,” said Weedman. “Other times I look back and think about how closely we’ve managed to stay with our original mission. I always feel encouraged when I see young kids arrive on the trail and get excited about nature and then come back later in high school or college to volunteer. We never know whose attitudes about the environment we’ve helped change.”

‘Labor of love’ inspires book on nature trail

By Barbara A. Schmitz

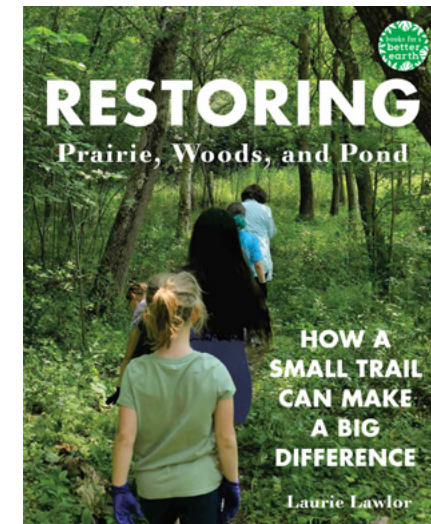
Laurie Lawlor has written more than 40 books, both fiction and non-fiction, including many for children. But when she heard from a mutual friend about a trail created by lifetime Wild Ones member Jean Weedman, she knew the story needed to be told.

“When I finally got the chance to go there and walk the trail, I became inspired,” Lawlor said. “It was a wonderful spot ... and a labor of love that Jean has been spearheading for 10 years.”

The [Eagle Nature Trail](#), which goes from an elementary school to the local public library in the town of Eagle in southeast Wisconsin, is on an 8-acre parcel that once was filled with garbage. Years ago, underneath a host of invasive species, Weedman discovered some native plants on the property, and knew that with work it could be restored to its original state of three ecosystems — wetlands, prairie and an ephemeral pond.

Not only has the land been restored, but it has become an open-air classroom. What really inspired Lawlor to write the book is that all the work was done by volunteers from many different backgrounds.

“They weren’t the tree hugger



type; they were people like firemen to principals to farmers...” she said.

Lawlor said she most enjoyed doing the research while writing, “Restoring Prairie, Pond and Woods: How a Small Trail Can Make a Big Difference,” which was published by Holiday House on Earth Day 2023. “It was an unusual project for me because I was combing through archival information from libraries and historical societies. I looked at surveyor maps, journals, photographs and diaries to learn more about the property.”

She first learned how the terrain was created going back to the [Ice Age](#) and how the indigenous peoples used it. Then she started doing inter-

views with all the people involved in the project and taking photographs of the children who helped to pull out invasive species and plant native plants.

Lawlor said the last half of the book shares children’s observations of nature. “As a writer, I was interested in how children became inspired from being outside,” she said, noting that the property has become an outdoor classroom where students write nature poetry, create nature-inspired artwork and much more.

Lawlor said her 90-page book is for readers from ages 10 to 90. While not a picture book, it is filled with color photos and is designed to inspire both children and adults. But mostly, it’s meant to tell them that they can do something like this in their own community.

It is part of the Books for a Better Earth series, which includes stories about positive things people are doing to help the planet and combat climate change.

“If you’re getting muddy and taking care of plants, you have a different relationship with Earth itself,” Lawlor said. “It’s a different experience than looking at nature through a video screen. In person, it has a much more profound effect.”