

# Wisconsin Woodlands



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## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Burlington Area School District Forest.....          | 6  |
| MFL Bill to Open Land for Vehicles Dead for Now..... | 10 |
| Sharing the Cost of Deer Browse Pressure .....       | 16 |
| Deer Hunter Numbers' Downward Trend.....             | 20 |
| Derecho Effects Remain.....                          | 26 |

*Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today*





Photos: Steve Schmidt

**Left: Honeybee hives can be found between the tall grass and short grass prairies of the Burlington Area School District Forest. Right: A strip of red pines planted by students with hardwoods growing in the understory.**

# A PLACE TO GET BACK TO NATURE:

## Burlington Area School District Forest

By Steve Schmidt

*“It is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature.”*

Aldo Leopold in his classic *“A Sand County Almanac,”* published 75 years ago, summarizes a basic premise in outdoor education. For the past 60 of those years since 1964, the Burlington Area School District Forest has offered students and the greater community a place to get back to nature.

In 1959, the United States canceled construction of the Bong Air Force Base near Burlington. Some of that land is part of the 4,515-acre Richard Bong State Recreation Area. Eight parcels of the project land were deeded to local school districts as school forests. Burlington’s school forest is the only remain-



ing property that has not been sold or merged with the state recreation area.

Burlington Area School District Forest is one of the most active school forests in Wisconsin, especially for forests without a full-time, onsite coordinator position. At least 1,203 students visited the forest in 2022-23, the 11th highest of the 111 school forest survey respondents. All K-8 students annually learn at the forest, as do some high school science and agriculture classes. Outdoor

skills club, cross country ski club, cross country meets and maple syrup and honey production, as well as nut and mushroom foraging opportunities, provide a variety of healthy activities. The forest is open to the public except during the WDNR certified Learn-to-Hunt program when it is closed to all other use.

Community members regularly visit the forest to hike or ride horseback on several miles of trails. The Burlington school forest has proved ideal for various professional forest research efforts by the WDNR, local SWAT training and geocaching. In 2023, Gov. Tony Evers toured the school forest to celebrate Arbor Day as students planted trees there.

A variety of habitat provides an interesting hike through the well-maintained trails on this 160-acre property. Students

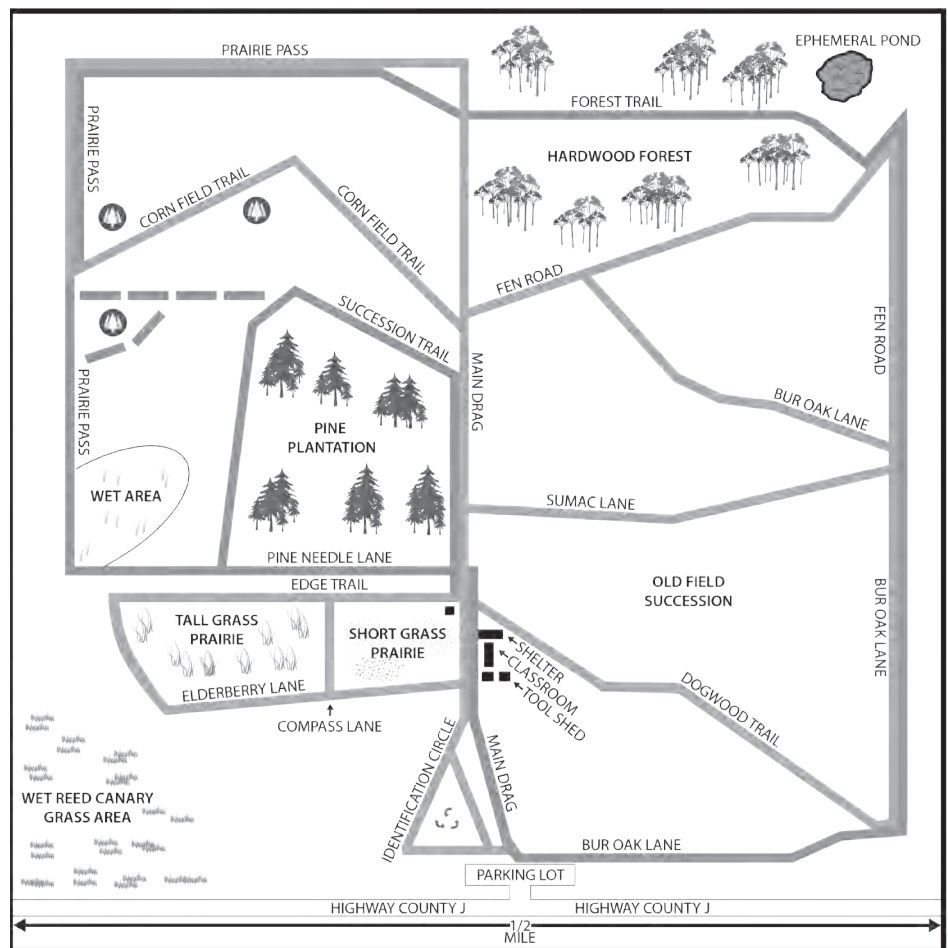
began restoring the land to forest in 1964 as they planted 10,000 trees including strips of pine, spruce and cedar on 22 acres. A mature oak stand can be found along the Main Drag trail in the central part of the property. The oak stand holds some significance for indigenous people who have held ceremonies there recently. Other forestland has regenerated naturally as mixed hardwoods, including black walnut, several oak species, shagbark hickory, black cherry, elm and ash. Various hardwood stands make up about two-thirds of the property, mostly in the northern half.

As one would expect in this part of the state, emerald ash borer (EAB) has affected all mature ash trees. Invasive plant removal of buckthorn, honeysuckle, autumn olive and multi-flora rose is ongoing. Native black locusts have invaded some acreage, including open areas that are being worked as prairie. As with many forests in southern Wisconsin, it is a challenge to stay on top of invasive species removal.

One of the benefits of being a registered school forest is the commitment by the WDNR to provide consultation with the field forester assigned to that county. For years, the forest was managed by Mike Sieger, a school forest award winner who will have retired by publication time. The recent forest stewardship plan written by WDNR Forester Ben Ross in 2022 includes ongoing invasive plant control, plans for a shelterwood cut in several stands in 2025, and subsequent sustainable forestry practices in 12 different stands identified for management purposes through 2047.

Grassland prairie has been established in a 5-acre strip south of the shelter and classroom part of the parcel. Honeybee hives between the tall grass and short grass prairies provide a spot where students can watch bees return and exit while they learn about pollination and honey production. Wet grassy areas are present in the far southcentral and southeast portions of the property and an ephemeral pond appears during wet times on the opposite northwest corner of the land.

The Burlington school forest has benefited from various scout and vocational school projects. A parking lot, large covered shelter, heated classroom



A map of the Burlington Area School District Forest property.



Maples have regenerated following invasive species removal at the school forest.

and bathroom with vault toilet create usable spaces to shelter when needed. The facilities are truly an asset given the amount of student and community use the forest experiences. Given its size and use, volunteers are needed to help with upkeep, especially to manage invasive species. Contact Trent Tonn, school forest coordinator, at [ttonn@basd.k12.wi.us](mailto:ttonn@basd.k12.wi.us) if interested.

A field trip to the Burlington Area

School District Forest is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 5, as part of the Natural Resources Foundation (NRF) Field Trips Program. Tonn will lead a hike and field trip cohort LEAF, Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program, will lead forestry education activities afterward. For more information on this trip – #252 – and the field trips program, visit [www.wisconservation.org/field-trips/](http://www.wisconservation.org/field-trips/). The Wisconsin School Forest Program is part of LEAF and is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education in the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point.

Burlington's school forest parking lot is located 5 miles southeast of Burlington schools in Kansasville. Search Burlington School Forest in Google Maps for the pin.

Burlington's school forest is open for public use during daylight hours.

*Steve Schmidt is an outreach specialist with the LEAF K-12 Forestry Education Program.*