



Brown Family Environmental Center

FIELD NOTES

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF THE BFEC • 1995-2020



Transforming a Farm into an Environmental Center

BY NOELLE JORDAN, MANAGER OF THE BFEC

This year, the BFEC celebrates 25 years of conservation and education. As milestones go, it's modest. But for those who have played a role in making things happen at the BFEC, I confess it feels like a big deal. It is no small thing to build something from nothing.

The dream started with Philip H. Jordan, Jr., who served as president of Kenyon from 1975 – 1996. His vision was to create a land lab for academic research and a place for students and the community to spend time in nature. He shared his vision with Ray and Pat Heithaus in 1980, when they arrived as new faculty in the biology department. Soon after that, the college purchased the Maxwell Farm, and the rest is ... well, history.

Turn the page for a photo essay showing the center's progress — from a farm beside the railroad tracks to the center for conservation, research and education it is today.

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1980s

In the beginning. The land that is now the BFEC began as the Maxwell Farm. The railroad pictured in the foreground was turned into the Kokosing Gap Trail for biking and hiking around 1991. The barn is standing where the ponds would eventually be built. The house is still standing and in use today, as is the driveway. The corn field is now prairie, and the space behind the house (lower right corner of photo) is now the wildlife garden.



1990

Before the gardens. The landscape behind the farmhouse was much different before the BFEC wildlife garden was planted.

New sign for a new center. The Kenyon Center for Environmental Study (KCES) opened in October 1995.



1990

Planting pines. Before the BFEC (or the Kenyon Center for Environmental Studies, or KCES, as it was known back then) was officially created, the Pine Plantation was established when 1,000 eastern white pines were planted for research purposes. In this photo, volunteers are preparing to plant the trees.



1995-96

Transformation. Just like today, volunteers were crucial in developing the BFEC grounds. Above: Volunteers build the gardens, in the years before the cob shed was constructed. Below (left to right): Ruth Woehr and Pat Heithaus working hard to position a large stone; Harry Itigaki with a huge mulch pile; Pat planting a tree.





1997

In bloom. The butterfly garden, looking good.

Measuring progress. Students Melissa Holman, Ian Schwab, Marj Ross and Don Auer studying the growth rates of the pines growing in the pine plantation.

1997



Telling stories. Professor Tim Shutt has been an avid program leader at the BFEC, leading programs on everything from bird watching to constellations. Here, he leads a bird walk along the Kokosing Gap Trail.

1997



"Do you think this will work?" As the first prairie unit is planted, Guy Denny, Stu Schott and Mike Dailey figure things out.

1997



1997



1997



Trail connection. Volunteers build the bridge connecting the center's garden to the Kokosing Gap Trail. Phil Samuel, trail president, recruited community members from the trail and the KCES to build the bridge.

1998



Scenic celebration. The Kokosing River, which bisects the BFEC property, was designated a state scenic river on November 4, 1997. A celebration in 1998 commemorated the event. Pictured left to right: Ohio Secretary of State Bob Taft, Doug McLarnan of College Township, Bob Gable of ODNR, Ray Heithaus of BFEC, and then-Kenyon President Robert Oden Jr. Ray Heithaus and Doug McLarnan were instrumental in getting this designation.

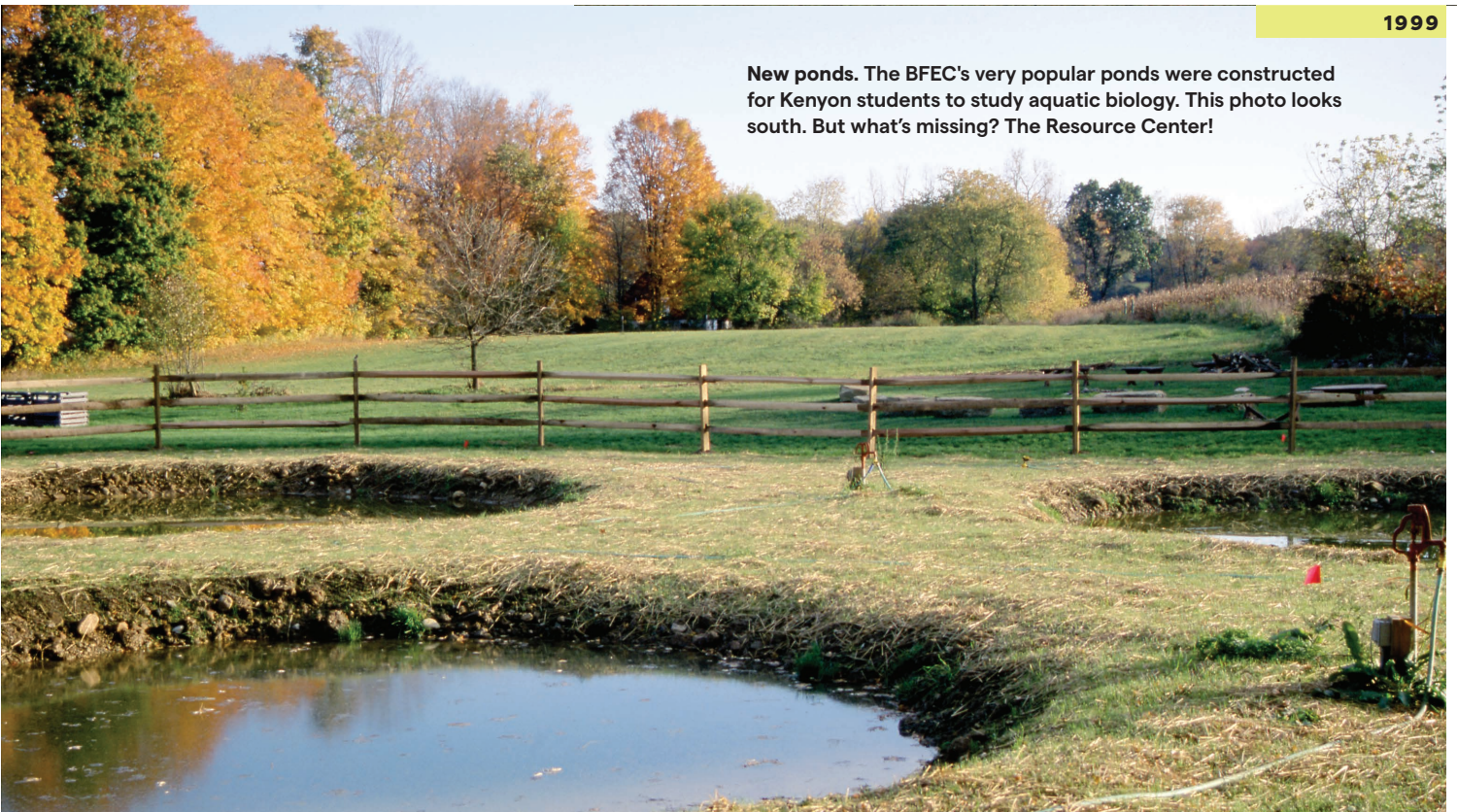
Maxwell Farm barn. The portion at the front was torn down, with the back portion remaining. It was moved and refurbished in 2000.

1998



1999

New ponds. The BFEC's very popular ponds were constructed for Kenyon students to study aquatic biology. This photo looks south. But what's missing? The Resource Center!



Autumnal glory. The prairie — planted in 1997 with the efforts of Guy Dailey, Stu Schott, Mike Dailey and other volunteers — shows brilliantly in the fall.



2000



2000

Becoming the Brown Family Environmental Center

In 1999, the Kenyon Center for Environmental Study transformed into the Brown Family Environmental Center, with a gift of an endowment from the Minigowin Foundation. The memorial gift renamed the center in honor of Robert Bowen Brown, a member of Kenyon's Class of 1911, and his family. Brown returned to his alma mater in 1941 to serve as secretary of the College. He went on to fill multiple roles at Kenyon, including dean, alumni secretary, director of public relations, founding editor of the Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin, and vice president for development.

Other members of the family memorialized by the gift are Robert Bowen Brown's wife, Frances Hearne Brown, their daughters Antoinette Brown Suter and Frances Brown Newell, and their sons Harry Whiting Brown II '37 and Robert Bowen Brown Jr. '40.

Breaking Ground. May 25, 2000, marked the ceremonial start of construction on the BFEC Resource Center. Pictured left to right: Sheila and Phillip Jordan, Kenyon President Robert Oden Jr., Karen Wright, BFEC Co-Directors Ray Heithaus and Inese Sharp, Mark Ramser, Jeff Robinson.



2000

The Resource Center was constructed with \$500,000 raised by the KCES Advisory Panel, with the help of a sizable contribution from the Ariel Foundation and Ariel Corporation CEO Karen Buchwald Wright.



2002

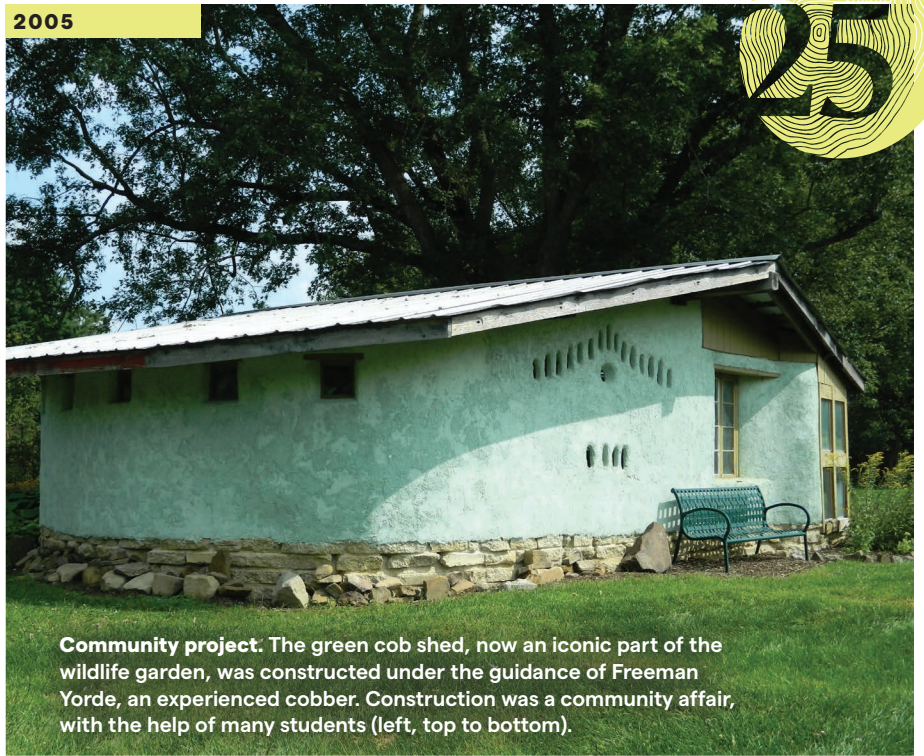


Rebuilding the barn. The original Maxwell barn was moved and refurbished with generous donations from longtime Kenyon friend, Ruth Bemis, and trustee emeritus William A. Stroud. Pictured is the new Bemis Barn before the aviary was built (top photo) and during construction of the aviary.

Stroud and Bemis visited the aviary during its construction, a project guided by Robert Mauck, professor of biology at Kenyon.



2005



Community project. The green cob shed, now an iconic part of the wildlife garden, was constructed under the guidance of Freeman Yorde, an experienced cobbler. Construction was a community affair, with the help of many students (left, top to bottom).



Opening a new trail. Adding to the BFEC's growing trail system, the Observatory Trail opened in 2007. Bill Barney cuts the ribbon to open the trailhead off Brooklyn Street (left), and Ray Heithaus says a few words to the assembled guests (below).

2007



2007

2007



Crossing the creek. The BFEC trail system continued to grow with the addition of a bridge over Wolf Run Creek. Tom Gensemer, owner of Jelloway Valley Builders (and son of Bruce Gensemer, professor emeritus of economics), did most of the work, with assistance from Dave Heithaus. Bob and Peg Heasley donated wood. The bridge construction was made possible with a gift from William Barney in honor of his daughter.



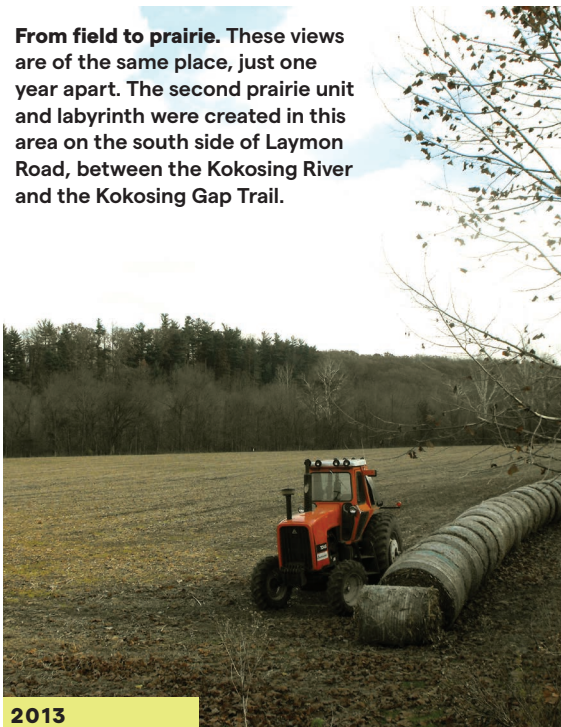
2008



2008

Planting native trees. The Archons, a student group, plant over 3000 native trees on the hillside leading up to the Pine Plantation. This effort was supported by U.S. Fish and Wildlife's "Partners for Wildlife" program. At right, the same hillside is shown before these trees were planted.

From field to prairie. These views are of the same place, just one year apart. The second prairie unit and labyrinth were created in this area on the south side of Laymon Road, between the Kokosing River and the Kokosing Gap Trail.



2013



2014

Growing in circles. In 2014, 500 oak trees were planted in concentric circles behind the second prairie unit on the south side of Laymon Road. This area would later become the labyrinth.

25



Inspirational grove. The pine plantation was (and still is) a magical place. It even inspired Evan Stephens Hall '11 to name his band Pinegrove. The band recently released its fourth album.



2014



2016

Mature landscape. The gardens (with the cob shed in the background) are thriving, and are now registered as a wildlife garden.



2019

Continuing transformation. This 2019 aerial view shows the labyrinth, constructed in 2017 in the BFEC's second prairie unit.



2020

An easier walk. Investment in the trail system continues with the construction of a new boardwalk along a muddy section of the New Gambier Loop Trail. The boardwalk was funded with a donation from an anonymous donor.



A resource for the entire community

For 25 years, the property, trails, bridges, buildings, prairies, labyrinth, gardens and everything in between have been used by thousands of people as they connect with the natural world. These 500 acres have seen elementary students for field trips, a multitude of weddings, countless families exploring nature, trail races, Kenyon students learning through hands-on science and so much more. A valuable resource for the community as well as Kenyon, the BFEC looks forward to another 25 years.

Nature and Us

BY SOPHIA FORNWALT '20, BFEC STUDENT MANAGER

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the miserable and the
crotchety—

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens to be where you are in the
universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light—
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

— *Why I Wake Early, Mary Oliver*

In times of uncertainty, of unwanted solitude, or days
when I start to lose my sense of certainty in the bonds
that hold life together, I turn to nature for a heal-
ing touch.

Though I am not yet to the days in my life where I
can wake before dawn and greet the sun in a romantic
pasture a mile off from my home like Mary Oliver, I
can find pockets of nature so long as I look for them. A
neighborhood walk gives glimpses of backyard gardens,
front porches housing potted geraniums and (if we're
lucky) an environmental center down the road. Some-
times it takes only a "yes" toward the draw we feel in
ourselves for some relief amid a hectic work week or a
day, which makes us feel anything but peaceful. This
"yes" can connect us to my favorite free pastime: a walk
in nature.

Walks, however short or long, along the riverbank
allow my mind to soften and allow me to look outside
of myself for calm: the sounds of twigs snapping un-
derneath my feet, or of a breeze through the sycamore
trees high above my head. My heart leaps at the sight of
a bald cypress' woody knees peeking out from the earth
like a miniature woodland kingdom. I can take my sur-
roundings one tree, or even one leaf, at a time — there
is no assignment to accomplish, no one to please. On
a walk in the woods, I am allowed to have nothing to
say. On a walk in the woods, I am allowed a world that
grows in stillness. I am given the freedom to not know
the answers and release my thoughts into the sunshine
and let them be absorbed by the plant life all around
me. I've decided plants are the world's best listeners.

“Everything in nature invites us constantly
to be what we are.”

— *Gretel Ehrlich, author of The Solace of Open Spaces*

The solace of nature gives us the opportunity to feel
accepted by an environment whose life is like our own:
vulnerable to harm, experienced in change, and a lover
of summer's sunshine. If we sit quietly enough, we can
find ourselves surrounded by Carolina chickadees hop-
ping from branch to branch on a nearby shrub. I once,
to my utter joy, was visited by a shy but trusting tufted
titmouse who joined my grandmother and me on the
entire duration of our woodland walk. He didn't seem
to mind our giggling or our unmistakable, clumsy hu-
man bodies. Maybe he, too, felt safe and sure of himself
under the forest's canopy.

These moments in nature invite us into a world of
delight in color, movement and sound. On a riverside
trail, the weight of the day can grow softer. By allowing
ourselves the time to create a connection with nature,
we make room in ourselves for a kind of self care that
replenishes us and brings surprise and delight to an
otherwise stressful, monotonous day. The Kokosing
rushes after a long night of rain, asking us to cast our
stress into its current, even if just for an hour. A white-
tailed deer might spring herself out of the meadow,
leaving bright heads of goldenrod swaying excitedly
behind her.

This community of wildlife is not just for TV
documentaries or the couple weeks a year we can take
time off. It's right outside our windows, just down the
road, and waiting for you.



The Kokosing River: Hellbender Haven

BY EMMA RENEE COFFMAN '22, BFEC STUDENT MANAGER



Photo: Brian Gratwicke. Originally posted to Flickr as Hellbender, CC BY 2.0. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=10786308>

The Kokosing River's high-quality waters and river beds are home to many creatures, big and small. It might be one of the best places for one rather otherworldly amphibian, the eastern hellbender.

Don't be fooled by its title — this giant salamander is harmless. Its weird name probably comes from its strange appearance and size. Hellbenders can reach a whopping 27 inches in length, and their entire bodies are covered in brown wrinkles of skin. Though they are quite a sight to behold, seeing one is rare. These gentle giants spend most of their time hiding in river sediments and under large rocks, eating crayfish, worms and small fish. Unlike some salamanders, the hellbender lives its entire life underwater, breathing through the folds of its skin by taking in oxygen from surrounding water.

Because they need clean water to breathe, hellbenders are very sensitive to water quality. Unfortunately, pollution and runoff from industry nearby can pose a direct threat to them. Over the years, Ohio's rivers have seen a decline in native hellbender populations. As a result, hellbenders are currently endangered in Ohio.

But all hope is not lost. The Kokosing's clean waters offer a fresh start for the hellbender, and efforts to bring them back have been making Knox County a true hellbender haven. In 2007, Knox County Parks established the Hellbender Preserve, a 15.43-acre site that includes Jelloway Creek, a stream with similar water quality to the nearby Kokosing. Then, in summer 2016, a combined effort between Ohio State University's Biodiversity Conservation Partnership, the Columbus Zoo, the Toledo Zoo and Knox County Parks led to a successful release of over 100 hellbenders into local stretches of the Kokosing River.

This summer, consider visiting the Knox County Hellbender Preserve or taking a stroll along the BFEC's River Trail, which parallels the Kokosing River. While you're exploring the parks or playing in the river, remember to tread lightly — you're in somebody's home, after all. The hellbender — or mud cat, or snot otter, or devil dog — is making its comeback, and we should be hell-bent on bringing it home.

Foxfire: An Unsolved Mystery

BY SHANE MCGUIRE, BFEC LAND MANAGER/NATURALIST

Thousands of years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle described a cold firelight glowing from the woods. What he was describing would later be called foxfire or, to some, fairy fire.

Foxfire is the general term for bioluminescent fungi that grow mainly on decaying wood. At night, these fungi glow a beautiful green or blue or yellow, depending on the species. It is thought that the “fox” part of the name comes from the French word “faux,” meaning false.

Over 70 species of fungi have been identified as bioluminescent. Interestingly, individuals within the same species glow and others do not. Some glow dimly, and some glow so brightly that some say you can use it to read a book. In the 1600s, a Dutch physician reported that people in Indonesia used them as torches.

Most bioluminescent fungi are found in the tropics, but there are several species in the U.S. (and in Ohio), including *Panellus stipticus* (bitter oyster) and *Omphalotus olearius* (jack-o'-lantern). If you want to find foxfire, the best place to search is in moist forests, at night, in mid- to late summer. Look at the base of trees and on logs resting on the forest floor. The glow is very dim in Ohio, so take your time while looking, and make sure your eyes are fully adjusted to the dark. Leave your flashlight at home.

Foxfire is an unsolved mystery because scientists can't figure out why it glows. There are currently three different theories: the glow could attract beetles and other insects, which help spread its spores around the forest; it could deter animals from eating it; or, possibly, the bioluminescence produces an antioxidant that cleans up free radicals that have built up in the fungus.

Regardless of the reason for its glow, you can't help but get excited when you see it. So if you have access to forests this summer, wander around at night and search for a true unsolved mystery.

Reminder: BFEC trails are open dawn to dusk only. Refer to the BFEC website, bfec.kenyon.edu, for upcoming programs and events.



Photo: Jason Hollinger. Originally posted to Flickr as Jack-o-Lantern Mushroom, CC BY 2.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?title=File:Jack-o-Lantern_Mushroom_downside.jpg

Green Corner: Preposterous and Astounding Beauty

BY DAVE HEITHAUS '99, DIRECTOR OF GREEN INITIATIVES

So far in 2020, most of us have probably noticed a few things that we took for granted before March. The amount and types of time we spend with friends and family, the framework that work, school, and civic engagement allows us to hang the better parts of our interests on, toilet paper ... While I hesitate to add “nature” to that list (considering the fact you are holding a newsletter from a nature center), I am going to go out on a limb and do so.

We have all seen new people in places where we are often largely alone — those hidden bends in the creek at the BFEC, or a special spot at one of our fine regional parks. We might reasonably assume many of these folks are venturing forth to discover or rediscover natural areas that only received a passing glance before we got cut off from our daily routines, and more power to them! What could be better than trading an extra hour shopping or sitting at a restaurant for some good, old-fashioned communing with nature? What wonders they must be experiencing as neophytes to the natural world. But do

we true believers actually have a horse high enough for the ride through that forest of patronization?

I don't. A scarlet tanager told me so. Then two chipmunks skittering in circles around a dead ash tree. Then a flake of white flint buried at the base of an oak on a bluff above a patch of skunk cabbage and scouring rush. As I wandered familiar places, things I'd stopped seeing kept hammering the point home.

My realization this year was that my time outside had become mostly “fresh air,” time spent taking for granted the preposterous, astounding beauty and diversity that we are gifted with here in our corner of the world. My eyes and ears had lost the fine-tuning and curiosity that drew me out in the first place, and all of the tiny intricacies and interactions that make nature nature had grown muddled into a sort of brown and green blob. Not cool.

So here's the thing: with the time to truly, deeply observe our world, take it. And don't ever lose it again.

VOLUNTEERS AND DONORS

SPRING 2020

To our tireless volunteers: we could not keep up without you.

Mia Craig	Willa Kerkhoff
Owen Decatur	Drew Kerkhoff
Veronica de Pascuale	Bev Morse
Jill Emmelhainz	Brian Miller
Wendy Fetters	Miriam Dean-Otting
Greg Gillen	Riker Sweazey
Sarah Goslee-Reed	

And to those who would have volunteered if we hadn't been hit with a pandemic.

Kenyon's Phi Beta Kappa students, who would have removed invasive species

Mount Vernon High School National Honor Society, who would have removed invasive species

All of the Kenyon students who would have staffed our Earth Day Festival

Corrine Lund, who would have presented two public programs

Jake Peer, who would have presented two public programs

Dr. Allan Bezzoli, who would have presented one public program

Our donors have kept us going for 25 years. A huge and humble “thank you” to all of you.

BENEFACTOR

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STUDENT

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IN-KIND DONATIONS

Randy Canterbury at Knox County Recycling and Litter Prevention donated hundreds of trash bags.

Jim and Mary Fridich of Knox Berry Farm donated a beautiful bat house.

Michael Hufnagel donated canna lilies to our garden this year.

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

As we celebrate 25 years of conservation, the Brown Family Environmental Center looks forward to welcoming the community to the preserve for another year of programs and events. The BFEC and Kenyon are carefully planning how to safely receive visitors in our COVID-19 world, and we will add programs and events as planning continues.

Watch our website at bfec.kenyon.edu, or join our email list to receive notifications when new events and programs are added.

In the meantime, stay healthy!



Brown Family
Environmental Center
Kenyon

bfec.kenyon.edu | 740-427-5050



BROWN FAMILY ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER | 9781 LAYMON ROAD | GAMBIER, OH 43022-9623

OUR MISSION

The Brown Family Environmental Center exists to support the academic goals of Kenyon College, to provide opportunities for education and research, to engage Central Ohioans of all ages with nature, and to conserve the natural diversity of the Kokosing River valley.

OUR STAFF

Luke Hester '20, *Post Baccalaureate Fellow*
Jill Kerkhoff, *Facilities Coordinator and Office Administrator*
Shane McGuire, *Land Manager Naturalist*
Noelle Jordan, *Manager*

Invest in another 25 years

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There are many reasons to give, including the satisfaction of knowing you're a part of critical environmental education and conservation programs. Receive preferred access to workshops, a hard copy of our newsletters, and a discount on bird seed. **Use the form below to send your contribution today.**

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Your donation is tax deductible as allowed by law. The Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon College is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

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