



*WINNER! – John Nolen Award for Excellence
in Ecological Restoration Practices*

Pleasant Valley Conservancy is a labor of love for Kathie and Tom Brock

by Jacky Kelley

Kathie and Tom Brock are truly a unified force for oak savanna and prairie restoration, having worked in tandem in their retirement years to turn overgrown countryside into distinct native habitats.

The Brocks bought The Pleasant Valley Conservancy to permanently protect the 140-acre natural area in the Driftless Area of western Dane County. Their restoration work began in 1995.

When they bought the land, it looked quite different from the restored areas one can enjoy today; some of the land was farmed and the rest turned into pasture, or degraded woodland or wetland. Surveyor's notes

and plant surveys indicated that before European settlement, oak savanna was the dominant vegetation, interspersed with prairie areas.

In retirement, the Brocks rolled up their sleeves and got busy. According to The Nature Conservancy's Director of Conservation and Land Management Steve Richter, "They were both like college students again, soaking up as much knowledge about prairie and savanna ecology as possible. They joined us on burns, on work parties, on field trips. They deserve an 'A' for their understanding of prairie and savanna ecology, and also for applying what they learned in the field."

The Brocks also established the Savanna Oak Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to

the preservation and restoration of prairie and oak savannas. The Foundation serves as a land trust and ensures that the conservancy will remain a natural area.

"The white oaks you see here are 150- to 200-years old," Tom said on a recent visit to their property. "We had to remove a great many invasives to expose them and let the dormant undergrowth get a foothold. The fire-controlled savanna has its own unique spectrum of plants, distinct from typical prairie or woodland species."

The Brocks treated their few patches of prairie remnants with care to free them from cedars, honeysuckle, buckthorn, sweet clover, etc. as they collected and dispersed seeds and oversaw prescribed burns.

"There are a total of more than 400 species here, including rare ones such as the State Endangered purple milkweed," Kathie said.

Not only plants have benefited. The redheaded woodpecker, a bird of Special Concern in Wisconsin whose preferred habitat is oak savanna, has returned to breed.

Their work has been helped by federal and state agencies, volunteers from the Madison Audubon Society, the Girl Scouts, the Prairie Enthusiasts and others as well as summer student interns from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

And why wouldn't a retired couple pursue the easy life? The Brocks explain, "Who wants to sit around at the beach all day? What we're doing is much more exciting. Besides, we've got a tiger by the tail. We can't relax!"



Kathie and Tom Brock are not your typical retirees; they are enthusiastically and energetically restoring native habitats and educating others about ecological restoration.