

# Land Donation Provides Long-term Resources for Land Stewardship

Story by Kathy Andrews Wright

Photos courtesy Maury Brucker and Emiko Yang

**THE** Illinois Audubon Society recently received its second-largest gift ever, when Dr. Maury Brucker and Ms. Emiko Yang donated 160 acres of rich farmland in eastern Stark County. Brucker's family roots are solidly planted on that farm, with his grandfather purchasing the original acreage in 1939. The property contains a farm home, of which the original construction occurred in 1870. Adjacent to the homesite was a trail formerly used for driving hogs to Chicago, with the homesite frequented as an overnight stop for the hog drivers.

After earning a PhD in agricultural economics from the University of Illinois and working for several years for agricultural businesses in Canada, in 1980 Brucker decided to return to farm with his father. Eventually inheriting the property, he enlisted the aid of neighbors who have tenant farmed the property for 25 years. The free time allowed Brucker and Yang to focus their time on a hobby they enthusiastically and passionately share—restoration of natural habitats.

"The impetus for this donation is the work we undertook years ago on what is now the Oak Bluff Savanna Nature Preserve, a 22-acre high quality oak woodland, savanna and hill prairie in Marshall County that we donated to the Peoria Audubon Society in 2015," Brucker explained.

The couple also worked to restore 11 undeveloped lots, one lot at a time, in a subdivision on the bluffs over the Illinois River. Today known as the Hopewell Hill Prairies Nature Preserve (eight lots) and Fern Ridge Nature

Preserve (3 lots), Brucker and Yang donated these properties to the Illinois Audubon Society in 2019.

Oak Bluff Savanna, Hopewell Hill Prairies and Fern Ridge all exemplify how Brucker and Yang use their hands-on commitment to restoration to educate surrounding landowners.

"The Hopewell site is an excellent location for controlled burns, and by talking with neighbors about the importance of fire in community restoration they came onboard," Brucker said. "It didn't take long for them to see the positive effect fire had on reducing the dense stand of autumn olive."

During his 2002-2014 tenure on the Illinois Audubon Society Board, including two years as President, Brucker took part in selecting potential lands for acquisition, including the 2012 acquisition of what became the IAS-owned 40-acre Hartman Springs Nature Preserve in Pulaski County.

When I asked Brucker and Yang what their motivation was for the generous donation they responded that they could see the value the Society places on the preservation and management of high-quality lands.

Brucker, a life-long birder, and Yang, a former registered nurse, said they appreciated the fact that the organization is much more focused on birds and bird habitats than any other Illinois conservation organizations.

Regarding their donation, Brucker remarked "We were thrilled when Jim Herkert recognized our restoration work and that as a land trust organization



Maury Brucker's interest in birding was evident by the time he was 4 or 5 years old.

the Society needed to hire someone to coordinate and work alongside the volunteers undertaking restoration work on Audubon lands."

Under the donation agreement, income from the farm will be put toward stewardship activities.

"Over that last couple of decades, the Illinois Audubon Society has increased our land holdings, and with that comes an increased need to care for the land," Executive Director Jim Herkert remarked. "Maury Brucker drove into our collective consciousness that the Society must commit to being exemplary land stewards as well as landowners. The generous gift Maury Brucker and Emiko Yang have made will provide for stewardship of Society-owned lands—those presently owned as well as any acquired in the future—for many generations." ■



## BIO

Kathy Andrews Wright retired from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources in May 2012 after more than 33 years with the agency, with her final position as editor of

*OutdoorIllinois* magazine. She is a freelance writer, environmental educator, scuba diving instructor and signed on as Illinois Audubon editor with the winter 2015 edition.



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In 1999, Maury Brucker and Emiko Yang were awarded the IAS Conservationist of the Year Award for their efforts in the restoration of Hill Prairie Communities and their dedication to Illinois' Nature Preserves.

1. The Brucker family homesite as it appeared in 1941.
- 2-3. With the help of the University of Illinois Extension Service, the Brucker family planted a windbreak on the homesite. All but one of the original trees survives today.
4. A recent aerial photo of the property, with the homesite present on the northern boundary of the property.
5. Dr. Maury Brucker stands in a prairie patch south of the windbreak.
- 6-7. Emiko Yang's passion for developing rain and flower gardens is evident on the property.