

"Loving the Land - Laura Olsen Memorial Sanctuary"

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Presque Isle Audubon Society in Erie owns a beautiful 51-acre forested property in Crawford County, the Laura Olsen Memorial Sanctuary (LOMS). It's named for a PIAS member who enthusiastically supported its acquisition, but sadly died just a few months after the land was bought due to injuries suffered during a robbery.

Purchased in 1968 for only \$5,000, LOMS includes forested ravines, a wetland on Little Federal Run, and a former farm field becoming a woodland. Early on in our ownership a short trail was built, and a few shrubs planted, but the property remained mostly untouched and unused except for a few hikers. We did have it surveyed in 1997 by Biological Consultant Karlin Marsh. In her Forest Stewardship Plan she spoke highly of the aesthetic qualities of the property, noting the beauty of evergreen hemlocks, sculpted gray-barked beech trees and imposing large old red oaks. She also wrote that, "Any timbering of the property will decrease its aesthetic value, by removal of large specimen trees which possess aesthetic attributes ... and by the littering of the forest floor with the large tops or canopies of the harvested material."

We've all seen poorly logged woodlands left with trees smaller than 4 inches in diameter that look like elongated pencils. Or forests with deep log skidding roads that turn into creeks when it rains. But thankfully times have changed, and managing a woodland now can leave it still attractive, plus more diverse, vibrant and a better home for wildlife.

The Board of PIAS found this out when we met Director Annie Socci Maloney and forester Guy Dunkle of Foundation for Sustainable Forests in July 2017. They explained their philosophy of forest management, and asked us to partner with them in a possible project with the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's Central Herbicide could be applied judiciously with backpack sprayers to significantly reduce the numbers of multiflora rose, Japanese barberry and bush honeysuckle. Growing spaces for native species would be created once these invasive species were gone. A "worst-first" thinning of diseased ash trees, cut by foresters who were trained in Audubon Forestry for the Birds programs, would introduce sunlight to the forest floor. Log skidding would be done by horses, not machinery. The Board discussed his ideas for several months, as we had lots of concerns, and invited FSF to attend our September 2018 Board meeting. We bombarded them with questions. How many trees would be cut? Could we list certain beloved trees as off-limit to cutting? How would we keep ATVs off the property once there was an access road? What is the cost of spraying invasive species? Was the herbicide safe? Wouldn't the forest floor be ruined by horses? How would the property look after the spraying and tree cutting? Guy and Annie patiently answered our questions, and after more discussion at the November Board meeting, we voted in favor of accepting their proposals.

We signed a memorandum of understanding in January 2019. But the weather that year was not conducive to tree-cutting; the ground never dried out enough to allow horses to be able to come in without damaging the forest floor. That delay worked to our benefit, as some members of Presque Isle Audubon had misgivings about this project. At the February 2020 PIAS program for all members, Annie and Guy explained how their philosophy of sustainable forestry fosters native plants, increases tree age

and species diversity, and improves the overall health of our region's forests. The members responded enthusiastically to their presentation and expressed comfort in having the Sanctuary in such capable hands.

Finally, in early 2020, diseased ash trees were cut and removed, and in the spring months invasive plants were sprayed. I was leery about visiting the property afterwards, as FSF had warned us that LOMS would look "changed." In late July I decided it was my duty to check it out, however reluctant I may be. Walking in, I was simultaneously pleased and relieved. Stumps were here and there, but not many. I didn't see any deep skid marks. The wood thrush and scarlet tanager were still singing. It really didn't look changed in any major way. The biggest difference was the new gravel road leading a bit into the woods.

Now we're looking forward to 2021, to see how the birds respond to these changes. Over time, we're expecting LOMS to be a demonstration site, with tours led by FSF, as they show other woodland owners how a managed forest can be beautiful, healthy, and of course, sustainable.

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