NORTHWOODS LAND TRUST
NEWSLETTER
PROTECTING OUR WOODS & WATERS
FALL 2026



A scenic view of the Mercer Forest, the largest land purchase in NWLT's history, completed in October.

THE MERCER FOREST

A Legacy Project in the Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area

By Don Behm, NWLT Board Member

The Northwoods Land Trust's (NWLT) largest acquisition in size and cost to date is a 360-acre expanse of forest and wetlands providing a vital connection between vast state and county-owned lands.

This preserve in the Town of Mercer in Iron County is a legacy project made possible only with a generous bequest to NWLT. The property links the northernmost leg of the Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area with county forest in a stretch of protected land extending east to the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

Casey Baye, Scenic Waters Area Property Manager for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), informed the land trust that a family wished to sell its 200-acre property near the Little Turtle River for conservation. The WDNR considered the acquisition but it lacked funds to buy the land at that time because the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program had not been reauthorized, Baye said. Around that time, an adjacent property was listed for sale by a second family.

"We welcome the land trust purchase," Baye said, "to protect the habitats and ensure a wildlife corridor, and a corridor for recreation." The corridor enables wildlife and plants to move between preferred habitats and eliminates threats and obstacles posed by development that otherwise isolate those havens and the species residing within them.

"Nonprofit land trusts can be more nimble than public agencies in quickly securing properties for conservation," said NWLT Executive Director Ted Anchor. "It was a fortuitous opportunity to be able to work with two neighboring landowners simultaneously to protect a large block of unfragmented forest. It is getting more difficult to find large parcels of land in northern Wisconsin at a price that is attainable."

NWLT purchased the two adjacent parcels off Popko Circle West – 200 acres from the Hawkins family and 160 acres from the San Fillippo family – to form the connection between state and county lands. A generous bequest from the Estate of John W. Huppert provided nearly 88% of the funds needed for such a large-scale acquisition.

The project, known as the Mercer Forest, protects a variety of natural communities and wildlife.

The flat-topped ridge running southwest to northeast across the southern parcel supports upland forests of sugar and red maple, basswood, hemlock, and yellow birch with stands of aspen and white birch. Gentle slopes lead to lowland forests dominated by large diameter hemlock, white cedar, and black ash, as well as swamps and other wetlands.

In late spring, Blackburnian and black-throated green warblers seek hemlock

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stands for nesting. American redstarts and chestnut-sided warblers prefer the young hardwoods. Numerous trees with hollows and dead, standing trees provide cavities for nesting birds, from woodpeckers and owls to nuthatches and chickadees.

Moving north, a roller coaster landscape alternates between upland forests of maples, basswood, birches, and hemlock and low-lying wetland forests of tamarack, black spruce, black ash, and balsam fir. Ephemeral ponds also are found here. These ponds generally dry up in summer. For that reason, they do not harbor fish and are used as breeding grounds for amphibians. The ponds and the upland forests surrounding them provide habitat for the full life cycle of frogs and salamanders.

Among the other birds observed this year in the Mercer Forest are ovenbird, rose-breasted grosbeak, scarlet tanager, hermit thrush, least flycatcher, northern parula, and yellow-rumped warbler.

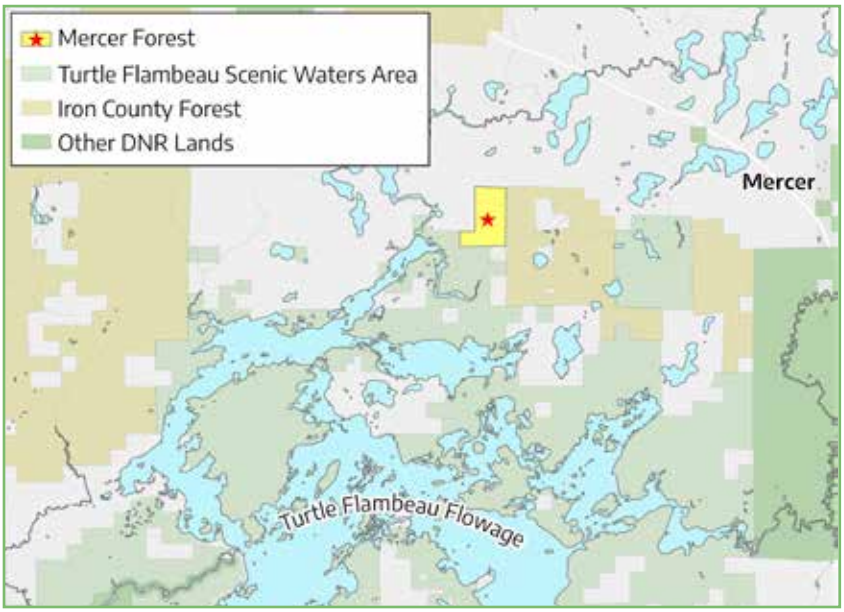
"The diversity of the forest lends itself to a very unique birding experience," NWLT Land Conservation Associate Frank Schroyer said. "The mosaic of coniferous and deciduous forests, young and old trees, and complex canopy, creates numerous habitats for many different assemblages of birds. The opportunity offered by the Mercer Forest to observe this many species in one place is special."

"We are grateful to the Hawkins and San Fillippo families who have cared for this land, and worked with NWLT to secure its permanent protection," NWLT Land Protection Director Kari Kirschbaum said. "NWLT is committed to stewarding the land in a way that enhances the long-term health of the forest for the benefit of the plants and wildlife that inhabit it."

"We look forward to partnering with the state and county to provide opportunities for the public to enjoy this beautiful property year around," Kirschbaum said. "Ultimately, the goal of this property is to someday designate it as an official part of the Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area."

Tim Hawkins said NWLT's acquisition of their family property was "an answered prayer." "By choosing NWLT as the buyer, we were assured that the land would be preserved," he said.

The forest was named "Hawks





Large boulders, known as erratics, left behind by a melting glacier, lay scattered atop a broad ridge in the forest.

THE TURTLE-FLAMBEAU FLOWAGE

In 1926, the Chippewa and Flambeau Improvement Company built a dam on the Flambeau River, downstream of its confluence with the Turtle River, to create the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage in Iron County. The impoundment formed behind the dam flooded 16 lakes and nearly 14,000 acres to provide water storage for downstream hydroelectric plants.

The state purchased 22,000 acres, the flowage and adjoining property, from the company in 1990. At that time, then-Gov. Thompson called the flowage "one of Wisconsin's crown jewels." Two years later, he designated the flowage as a protected wilderness.

Today, the Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area encompasses more than 37,000 acres. The area is known for recreational opportunities on water and land, with hiking and hunting trails and remote, water-access-only campsites. The flowage provides a diversity of native warm-water fish: walleye, musky, northern pike, largemouth and smallmouth bass, and panfish.

The Scenic Waters Area has a high density of bald eagles, osprey, and common loons. Black terns, merlins, and trumpeter swans are among the 150 other bird species calling this home. More than 30 species of mammals live here, with moose observations becoming more common, as well as 20 species of reptiles and amphibians.

The Northwoods Land Trust's Mercer Forest is located within the project boundary of the Turtle-Flambeau Scenic Waters Area.

Nest Hunting Camp" after the family's purchase of the land in 1982, he said. Trails were established and deer stands were built after his father, Earl, retired. "It's where he came alive," Tim Hawkins said.

"Deer season with friends and family was the culmination of all that work and we hunted on that land for decades," he said. "The stories I tell to my family and friends center around that land."

The Otto and Carol Gebhardt Foundation awarded NWLT a grant to help pay for project expenses after founder Otto Gebhardt and Foundation President Kevin Lederer visited the property this year.

"I want to keep things in a natural state. I love trees," Otto Gebhardt said in describing why the foundation supported the acquisition. "We specialize in nature." The Gebhardts split their time between homes in Mercer and Florida and they have witnessed unchecked development throughout Florida. They do not want that to happen in northern Wisconsin.



Yellow birch and hemlock stand in the Mercer Forest.

"BY CHOOSING NWLT AS THE BUYER, WE WERE ASSURED THAT THE LAND WOULD BE PRESERVED."
-TIM HAWKINS

A Mercer Forest property management plan is being drafted. When completed, the plan will be available on the NWLT website along with a map of public access locations. The property will be open to the public for exploration, relaxation, birding, foraging, and hunting.

Expenses related to this project were supported by grants from the Caerus Foundation, James D & Jane P Watermolen Foundation, Otto & Carol Gebhardt Foundation, and Wisconsin Land Fund at the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation.





An American toad hides (top) and common gartersnake hunts (lower) in the yellow, gold, and brown leaves carpeting the forest floor.

LEGACY GIFT LEADS TO LEGACY PROJECT

The Mercer Forest Project was made possible through the Estate of John W. Huppert. John was a founding board member of NWLT who passed away in 2025.

John led the creation of the Northwoods Legacy Society to accept bequests and recognize dedicated supporters who leave NWLT legacy gifts. After his generous bequest, the Board of Directors designated a portion of those assets to the Land Protection Fund. The fund was created by NWLT to act quickly to protect threatened lands or parcels of significance.

To learn more about the **Northwoods Legacy Society**, visit ***northwoodslandtrust.org/legacy*** or contact us. Bequests left through wills, trusts, or financial accounts are the primary way NWLT will fund conservation land purchases in the future.

DONATE TO THE MERCER FOREST

There is still an opportunity to contribute to this special project!

Gifts will support NWLT's Land Stewardship Fund to finance the management and maintenance of the property.

To donate to this campaign, visit *northwoodslandtrust.org/support* and click on the "year-end special giving" button, or send a check to NWLT with "Mercer Forest" in the memo.

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NWLT PROTECTION TOTALS

16,026 acres of land conserved

89 miles of shoreline protected



UPCOMING EVENTS

WINTER WANDERING
JANUARY 24, 2027 at 10 AM
at Marshall Wildlife Conservation Area
in Lac du Flambeau

SNOWSHOE EXPLORATION
FEBRUARY 12, 2027 at 10 AM
at Spring Meadow Creek in the
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest

SNOWSHOE HIKE
MARCH 4, 2027 at 10 AM
at Holmboe Conifer Forest State Natural Area
in Rhinelander

Visit **www.northwoodslandtrust.org** for more information. Register online or call (715) 479-2490.