



STELLA NIAGARA PRESERVE VISION PLAN

JANUARY 2016

FOR THE WESTERN NEW YORK LAND CONSERVANCY
BY MAKE COMMUNITIES



WESTERN NEW YORK
LAND CONSERVANCY



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Prepared for the Western New York Land Conservancy
by Make Communities
January 2016



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The Western New York Land Conservancy would like to acknowledge the community members and institutions who have contributed invaluable time, energy, cooperation, and funding to creating the Stella Niagara Preserve. Without this tremendous outpouring of support, this project would never have been possible. The Land Conservancy offers its gratitude and thanks to all who have come together to protect this incredible natural asset today and for future generations. We look forward to the ongoing restoration and stewardship of the Preserve, including all of the opportunities, collaborations, and memories it will bring. A special thank you to the Sisters of St. Francis for more than a century of caring for this special place and for their continued commitment to our community.

Photo credit: Paula Sciuk
Cover photo credit: Paula Sciuk



THE STELLA NIAGARA PRESERVE

Photo credit: Paula Sciuk

THE VISION

The Stella Niagara Preserve will be a world-class, publicly accessible nature preserve that provides an iconic cultural and natural link in the Niagara River Greenway.

The Western New York Land Conservancy's ongoing stewardship of the property will be guided by the site's incredible natural characteristics and will reflect its long legacy of peace and tranquility. In doing so, the Land Conservancy will protect and enhance wildlife habitats, provide public access to the Preserve, protect and celebrate the Preserve's diverse attractions, explore and promote the site's history, and continue to adapt to changing needs and conditions over time.

The Western New York Land Conservancy is a regional, not-for-profit land trust that works with landowners, municipalities, and other organizations to help conserve the region's most cherished natural areas and working farms. The Land Conservancy has been preserving our region's irreplaceable natural heritage since 1991. An accredited land trust, the organization has helped to protect more than 6,000 acres of land on more than 60 properties throughout Western New York.

The Stella Niagara Preserve is the most ambitious and high profile project in the Land Conservancy's history. The property is incredibly scenic, and is one of our region's most ecologically and historically important places. For generations it has been a place of serenity, peace and reflection, providing a connection to both nature and history that is unsurpassed in the region. With the Land Conservancy's stewardship, it will remain this way far into the future.

With 29-acres and more than a quarter-mile of shoreline, it is the largest privately-owned, undeveloped tract of land along the entire length of the Niagara River. The Preserve is a key piece of the Niagara River Greenway. It is located along the river on Lower River Road in the Town of Lewiston, just north of Niagara Falls, and sits adjacent to the residence of the Sisters of St. Francis, Stella Niagara Education Park and the Center of Renewal. The Preserve is also an important part of the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area and the Niagara Historic Trail.

In May 2015, after a \$3.65 million fundraising campaign, the Land Conservancy purchased this spectacular property from the Sisters of St. Francis. More than 150 people gathered that July for a ceremonial ribbon cutting and monarch butterfly release, officially opening the Preserve to the public.



Photo credit: Lauren Kirchmyer

This Vision Plan will help guide the Land Conservancy's landscape restoration design and the ongoing stewardship and maintenance of the Stella Niagara Preserve. It will inform decisions about public access, as well as activities, programming, and collaborations at the Preserve. It will also help guide the creation of interpretive elements and education components, from signage and displays on-site to education and outreach materials about the Preserve.

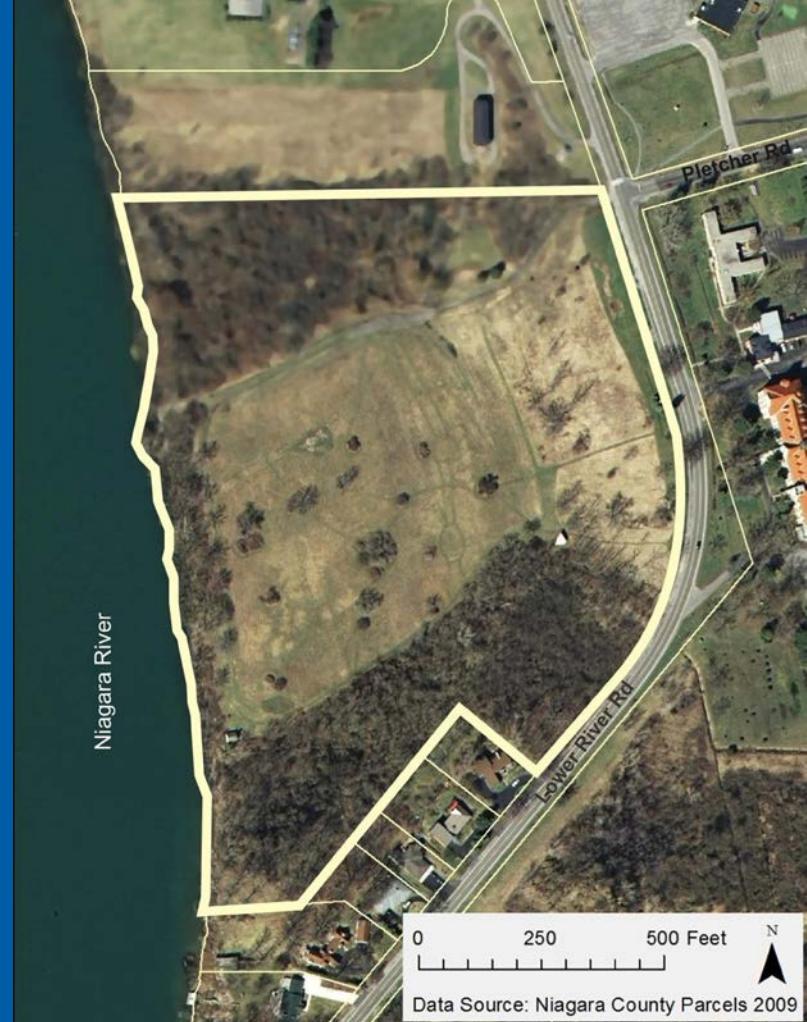


Photo credit: Ana Hernandez-Balzac

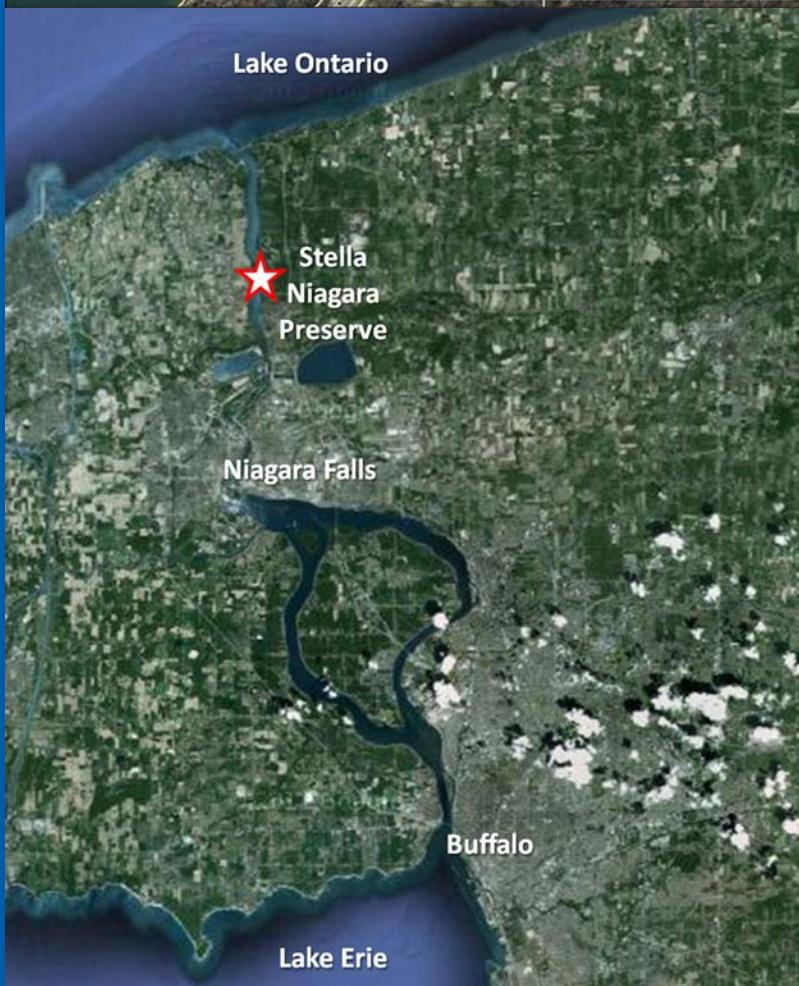
The Land Conservancy undertook a stakeholder engagement process in order to help set the course for this Vision Plan. Throughout the summer and fall of 2015, this outreach included five stakeholder working sessions with subject matter experts and community members. These sessions examined the ecology of the site and its relationship to the broader environment; the historic and cultural elements represented at the site; and the neighborhood and community partnerships and possibilities emerging around the Preserve. These highly interactive and rich sessions provided much of the basis for this Vision Plan. The public's first glimpse of a vision for the Stella Niagara Preserve included design precedents from the project partner and nationally renowned restoration landscape architect team of Darrel Morrison and Nancy Aten. This was unveiled at a community presentation at the Lewiston Senior Center where additional community feedback was gathered to help sharpen and refine this plan.

DARREL MORRISON, FASLA

The Land Conservancy engaged Darrel Morrison, known for his ecological approach to landscape design and restoration, and native plant trailblazing, to design a phased restoration plan for the Stella Niagara Preserve. Morrison's groundbreaking work for the University at Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison, the New York Botanical Garden, and the Storm King Art Center in the Hudson Valley point to the subtle beauty and immense ecological diversity of natural grassland landscapes.



Data Source: Niagara County Parcels 2009





GUIDING WISDOM

Photo credit: Jay Burney

The Land Conservancy distilled a vision for the Preserve based on a desire to honor the incomparable value this special place adds to Western New York. These traits are those that are most important to the community at large and those the Land Conservancy will strive to uphold in its stewardship.

The Stella Niagara Preserve...

- is an incredible natural setting and provides a unique and crucial area for plant and animal life.
- is a place for people to develop a relationship with nature.
- has cultural, spiritual, and artistic significance.
- has many important stories to tell and lessons to teach.
- will continue to evolve.

The Preserve is an incredible natural setting and provides a unique and crucial area for plant and animal life.

The site's extensive frontage and position along the Niagara River contribute to an amazing diversity of habitats.

From the river to the riparian zone along its shore, to the vernal pools, wetlands, and forests along its southern and northern edges, and across the large meadow in the center, the Preserve possesses an array of natural settings that provide space and sustenance for a broad mix of plant and animal species. Perhaps most unique among them, however, is the natural landing area which is unequaled along the lower river.

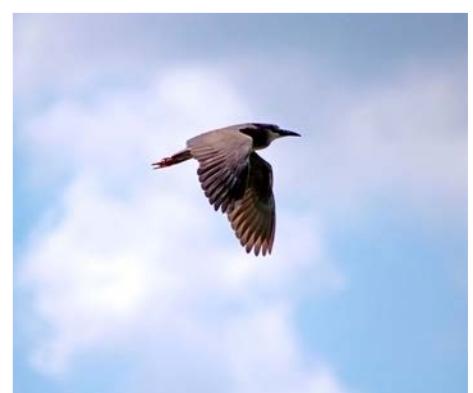


Photo credit: Amanda Cesari

The entire Niagara River is designated as a globally significant Important Bird Area, putting it on par with places like the Galapagos, Yellowstone, and the Everglades. The Preserve itself is an important migratory stopover and overwintering location for birds. It is also an important place for pollinators, such as monarch butterflies. The shoreline provides important fish spawning habitat, and the river offshore, known locally as the Stella Drift, is one of the river's most popular sport fishing spots.

Yeh-heh-weh-kwah-taw

The Stella Niagara Preserve has been an important landing site for thousands of years. This site was part of the end point of a water route hundreds of miles long, leading from the Atlantic Ocean through the St. Lawrence River, across Lake Ontario, and up the Lower Niagara River. This natural landing site was named Yeh-heh-weh-kwah-taw: the place where they take the boats out. This stretch of land represented one of the last opportunities to come ashore prior to reaching Niagara Falls.

This same landing is the exact spot where the British came ashore during the War of 1812 when they captured Fort Niagara and destroyed the villages of Lewiston and Niagara Falls.



The Preserve is a place for people to develop a relationship with nature.



Photo credit: Rachel Chrostowski

The Stella Niagara Preserve is a critical link between people, nature, and the water. There are few natural places like this where people can reach the shoreline of the lower Niagara River. The unique sloping topography of the land also provides a surprisingly sheltered and serene landscape, away from traffic noise and distractions, where it is possible to be immersed in and enjoy the quiet of nature.

The Preserve need not be a new park. There are multiple active recreational opportunities nearby at Joseph Davis State Park and the adjacent Lewiston Town Park. Parking and restrooms can also be accommodated at nearby facilities.

The Preserve has cultural, spiritual, and artistic importance.

While the Preserve is in many ways first and foremost about nature, ecological features are one among many attractions at the site. For centuries and even millennia, indigenous people launched and portaged boats from the natural landing as they hunted, fished, gathered, and traded along the river. Home to the Sisters of St. Francis since 1907, the Preserve includes their historic art and architecture. The chapel, peace memorial, grotto, statues, and a series of sgraffito murals by Joseph Slawinski are a testament to their values. These multiple elements enrich the site.

These features are also an opportunity to engage people with interests in art and culture who may not otherwise seek out natural spaces or learn about our region's natural and ecological heritage.

The Preserve has many important stories to tell and lessons to teach.

In addition to the physical elements of the site that speak to its cultural significance, the Preserve has a rich natural and geological history as well as a role in international, national, regional, and local history. Each of these are contributing elements to the notion of the Preserve as a teacher and teaching site for young and old alike.

Though there are Witness Trees that are old enough to have experienced the British landing of the War of 1812 and the entirety of the Sisters of St. Francis stewardship, their age pales in comparison to the site's stories that date to the formation of the gorge itself and continue through millennia of indigenous usage. The site has an important story to tell about the intersection of people and nature and our shared stewardship and connectedness to the earth – a broad story of peace, convergence, and interdependence.

The Preserve will continue to evolve.

Though the land has always been mostly open, with few structures other than those present now, the site has not always looked the way it looks today, and its usage and role have evolved over time. Though the site is now a preserve, that does not mean it will be static. There is no singular, perpetual answer to the question of how it will appear or function.

This Vision Plan will serve as a guide to the Land Conservancy's relationship to the Stella Niagara Preserve, but the way that the site is maintained, the way the public interacts with the site, the growth and successional changes of the landscape, and the way that natural forces impact the flora and fauna that flourish here will be an ever shifting dynamic. The Land Conservancy will need to be conscious of ongoing changes in the Preserve's internal and external ecosystem including nature, people, and organizational considerations, and the organization will need to adapt and evolve its stewardship appropriately.

Photo credits from top to bottom: Mary McCutcheon, Paula Sciuk, Amanda Cesari, Deborah Nikifortchuk



GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The Land Conservancy has developed a series of goals and strategies to achieve the Vision of the Stella Niagara Preserve as a world class, publicly accessible nature preserve, guided by the knowledge and traits outlined in this document. These represent a high-level look at the Land Conservancy's work going forward, and a call for a community-wide partnership with the private, public, civic, and academic sectors.

Goals for the Stella Niagara Preserve

1. Protect and enhance wildlife habitats.
2. Provide access to the Preserve for people to walk, hike, kayak, canoe, learn, and be inspired.
3. Protect and celebrate the Preserve's diverse attractions.
4. Explore and promote the Preserve's history.
5. Learn—and adapt—together over time.

1. Protect and enhance wildlife habitats.

The creation of the Preserve is an opportunity and a responsibility to maximize the site's potential as wildlife habitat. Choices in restoration design and plantings have implications for the kinds of flora and fauna that will flourish on the site. These choices also will have maintenance implications for the Land Conservancy.

Restoration and enhancement of the Preserve will protect sensitive habitats but will require some habitats to be altered in the short-term as part of the aim to develop a rich, colorful, and seasonally-diverse site that will promote long-term and sustainable species diversity. The first phase of the Preserve's restoration and enhancement will prioritize the central meadow. There is a preference emerging to create an oak savanna in a portion of the meadow, a locally appropriate but threatened habitat, yet there are opportunities to include more open grassland areas as well.

There are many other habitat restoration and enhancement opportunities. The vernal pool and the mature forests could showcase plantings appropriate to Carolinian or eastern deciduous forests. In addition, there is currently a lack of transitional shrub and scrub habitat between the meadow and woods. A design that strives to restore transitional zones and increase overall coherence of the landscape would further enhance species diversity.

Fire & Ice: the dual traditions of a bountiful clearing

The land at the Stella Niagara Preserve has not always looked the way it looks today and was traditionally much more open. In addition to providing a habitat for local wildlife, it also has a history of providing for humans. The area was possibly cleared by burns to provide space for indigenous agriculture in the tradition of the Honorable Harvest. Prior to the installation of the ice-boom to protect hydroelectric infrastructure, ice floes historically scoured the shoreline, leaving few large trees. For much of the last century, the Sisters of St. Francis kept up these traditions of clearing the land by cultivating and mowing the meadow, as well as maintaining views at the water's edge.



2. Provide access to the Preserve for people to walk, hike, kayak, canoe, learn, and be inspired.

The Land Conservancy will work with its partners to create a landscape that is engaging and dynamic, and that draws the public into nature through beauty and wonder. From the road or from the river and all points in between, visitors should be taken with the natural beauty, serenity, and peacefulness of the site. The site should inspire a sense of discovery that will bring visitors back on multiple occasions.

Given that the Preserve is not a park and that there are nearby active recreation options at town and state parks, the Preserve should provide a new experience that complements what is already available nearby. The Preserve should encourage enjoyable, low impact uses to protect the ecology and history of the site. The Land Conservancy will consider ongoing indigenous customary uses as well. The Land Conservancy will continue to partner with the Town of Lewiston to provide amenities off site, such as parking and restrooms.

Much of the work to provide low-impact uses begins with the need to protect and enhance views, including views from the road and the river, as well as other iconic views from the trails that will be developed. As one of the few sites on the lower Niagara River that is not separated by a steep gorge at the water's edge, it is also especially important to provide access to the water at the site's natural landing.

It is important to incorporate features that engage people of all abilities. Universally accessible trails for those with mobility impairments or families with strollers should be included, where possible. Because not all will be able to make the full trip from the Preserve entrance to the water, features should also include interpretive elements that allow all people to experience parts of the Preserve that may not be physically accessible.

In order to elevate the focus on nature and ecology, all on-site interpretive elements and signage should be in harmony with and not detract from the site's natural beauty. For the same reasons, the design and operations of the site should also encourage good behavior by visitors.

“Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.” - ALDO LEOPOLD

Photo credits from top to bottom: Jajean Rose-Burney, Paula Sciuk, Jajean Rose-Burney, Paula Sciuk

3. Protect and celebrate the Preserve's diverse attractions.

The Land Conservancy will approach the site with a focus that will protect important natural features and cultural features such as archaeological sites and the historic art and architecture, including the chapel, peace memorial, grotto, and statues.

The site is unique among nature preserves in its combination of important natural and cultural heritage. To maximize the opportunity for people across the region and beyond to be enriched by the Preserve, the Land Conservancy will provide information on and off site about both the natural and human history in ways that are conscious, inclusive, and respectful of the cultural and historical contributions of so many.

The Land Conservancy will provide interpretive signage at the Preserve as well more interactive materials online. The Land Conservancy will also work with partners to provide a range of tours and programming that interpret the unique natural, cultural, artistic, and spiritual value of the site.

The Stella Niagara Preserve can fill needed gaps in our understanding of the region's cultural history. For example, the Preserve can be a site for programming related to indigenous culture which currently lacks a presence along the Niagara River.

Groups such as the Polish Arts Club of Buffalo have already begun the work to ensure that the community will appreciate and celebrate the irreplaceable Joseph Slawinski sgraffito artwork commissioned by the Sisters of St. Francis. Providing structured access to these local treasures that were previously unavailable to the public, such as those inside the chapel, is an important piece of this appreciation.

As people with varied interests will approach the Preserve with different emphases and at differing paces, the design of the site – including pathways that help guide visitors – should also simultaneously offer a variety of experiences and encourage additional areas for discovery.



Photo credits from top to bottom: Barney Gallagher, Paula Sciuk, Kateri Ewing

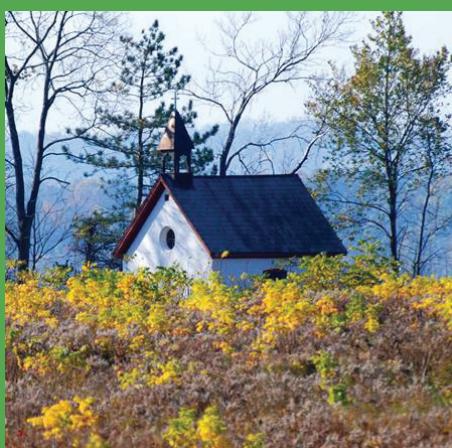


Photo credit: Paula Sciuk

The Little Chapel

The chapel on the Stella Niagara Preserve – reported to be the smallest religious structure in Western New York – has a long and storied history. Perhaps no part of that history is more remarkable, though, than the internationally reported ice jam of 1955. Prior to the installation of the Lake Erie ice boom, when temperatures began to rise each spring, ice floes would scour the lower Niagara River shoreline. In 1955, an exceptional 9-mile long ice jam – which was reported as 30 feet deep in places – damaged and destroyed buildings along

the length of the Niagara. Though ice surrounded the chapel, this tiny structure was ultimately spared any damage as the jam broke and the water and ice receded. A remarkable sgraffito mural inside the chapel now memorializes scenes from that harrowing time.

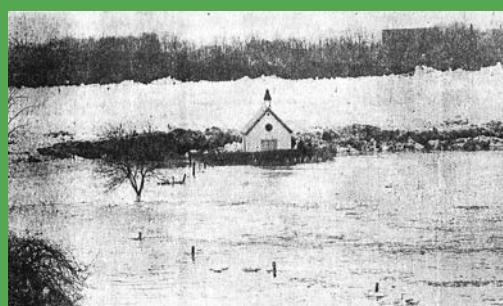


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Photo credit: Amanda Cesari

4. Explore and promote the Preserve's history.

The Preserve has a rich human history that crosses many time periods. Though at times marked by conflict, this site can tell an important story about peace, harmony, and the interconnections of people and nature. This began with the native culture of natural laws and sacred teachings and continued in 1964 when the Sisters of St. Francis highlighted the themes of truth, love, justice, liberty, and freedom in the peace memorial.

Although much is already known about the Preserve, the site's ecological and human history provides an incredible educational opportunity. Because of the Preserve's War of 1812 history, it can be linked, for instance, with programs at nearby Fort Niagara State Park and even across the river to historic sites in Canada.

The site also has many elements that warrant further research and exploration. The Preserve can become a continual learning and teaching space. The Land Conservancy will foster next-generation stewards by engaging schools and youth programs with education and experiential learning to develop and support an appreciation for the site. The Land Conservancy will also partner with universities and other organizations and institutions for research and education, for both ongoing partnerships and special projects, such as site surveys and explorations, historical research, service learning, and volunteer opportunities. In addition to bringing history to life, participation and stewardship from a wide array of individuals and institutions will bring the future to life as well, with new stories of restoration and evolution of the landscape, its habitat diversity, and its seasonal changes.

Lessons of Peace and Cooperation

As a natural landing site along the lower Niagara River, the Preserve served as the hub of multiple native civilizations over many millennia, such as the Wyandot and Haudenosaunee that traded peacefully with each other on this site for thousands of years according to the Great Law of Peace. This history of cooperation and peaceful coexistence was disrupted by the British landing at this site in the War of 1812, but this conflict ushered in 200 years of peace along the largest unguarded border in the world. The Sisters of St. Francis commissioned a peace memorial in 1964 and had the lands officially designated as a national Peace Site.



Photo credit: Barney Gallagher

5. Learn— and adapt—together over time.

The Stella Niagara Preserve's past contains an incredible history to discover, to protect, and to carry forward. The future of the Preserve will be no less rich and will create many new lessons to learn from and share with Western New York and beyond.

The Stella Niagara Preserve is and can continue to be an example for future projects, setting a best practice for the Land Conservancy and other efforts throughout the region. The opening of the Stella Niagara Preserve is the result of creative and innovative ways to protect and provide access to the Niagara River and the natural spaces along its length. The site is the first privately owned, publicly accessible nature preserve along the Niagara River Greenway, and will utilize world class design and maintenance practices. The Preserve's stewardship fund will help ensure that the Land Conservancy can operate and maintain the Preserve without burdening local taxpayers with increased costs.

The Land Conservancy did not develop the Preserve on its own. It was created through the generosity and hard work of many community members and community stakeholders. The Land Conservancy will continue to develop lasting partnerships with individuals and organizations across the region to thoughtfully and collaboratively write the next chapters of the Preserve's story.

The Land Conservancy will own the site in perpetuity. That is a long time, and conditions will undoubtedly and inevitably change. Not everything will or should be decided this week, this month, or this year, but, with the community insight outlined in this plan, the Land Conservancy will manage changes guided by the spirit and vision that we've created today.

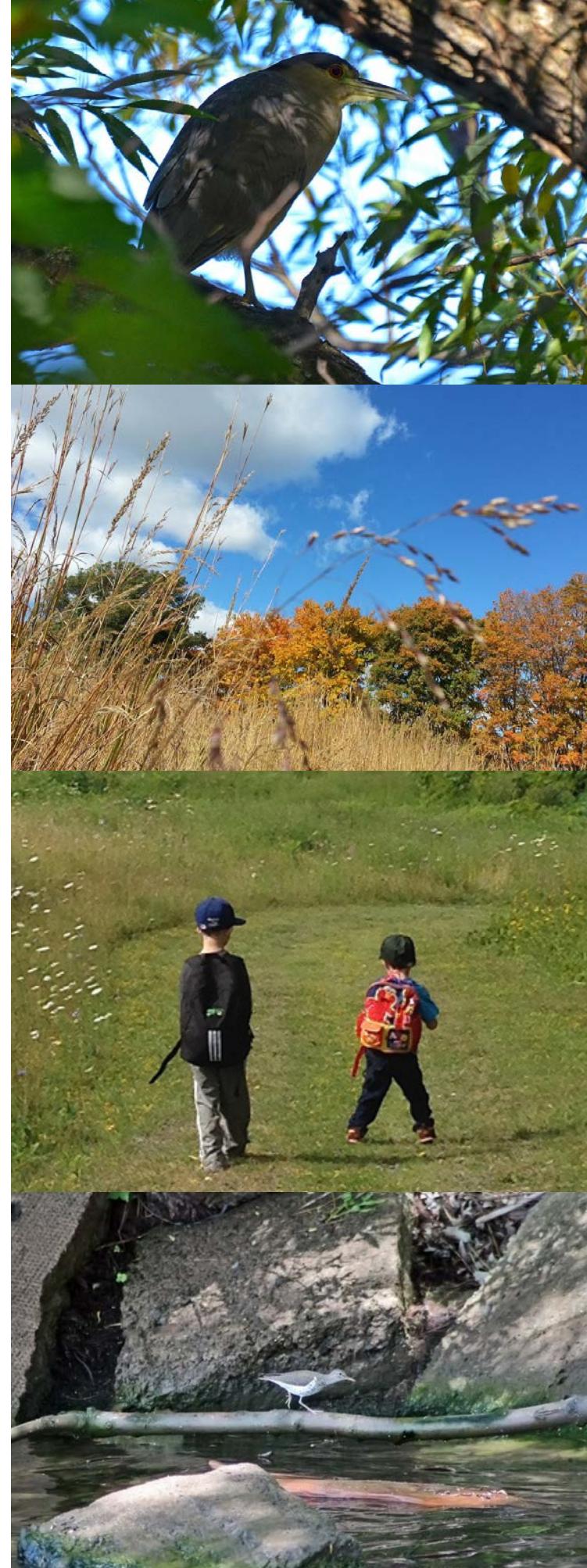


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Photo credit: Amanda Cesari



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