

Boot Lake

By Ronda DeCaire, Director

A Land in Transition

As the Elkhart County Parks embarks on the next 50 years, the Department will celebrate the addition of 300 acres. Boot Lake Nature Preserve will be transferred from the City of Elkhart to the Elkhart County Park and Recreation Board by the end of 2017. The transfer will ensure that this protected nature preserve remains a public park for generations to come.

The gift was first envisioned by leaders from the City's Public Works & Utilities and Elkhart County Parks departments over 18 years ago, when discussions began for a sustainable future for the preserve.

Boot Lake has a unique history.

Public Works purchased the land in 1968 to be used as a sanitary landfill for the byproducts of wastewater treatment. The fields were intermittently used as the city 'sludge farm' up until 1988.

In 1984, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) identified the nearby wetland as a significant habitat distinguished as a peaty muck flat. In addition, several state-endangered, threatened, and rare plants were found growing in the wetland. An earthen berm was already in place surrounding the sludge farm, which helped to protect the wetlands from runoff.

With a mission to become better environmental stewards, the City hired two private companies to remove the sludge in the early 1990s. The cleanup was followed by an AmeriCorps National Service grant in 1994 to recruit Elkhart EnviroCorps members, whose priority was the restoration of the property. The restoration included removing

70,000 pounds of trash, eradicating invasive species, establishing a trail system, installing bluebird boxes, benches, and other amenities. Where the sludge was once stored, a tall-grass prairie was planted.

In 2003, after restoration and additional land acquisition, Boot Lake became an official state-dedicated nature preserve with the IDNR. This special protection guides the management of the property in perpetuity, and is reserved for parcels of land in the state that have unique habitats and species.

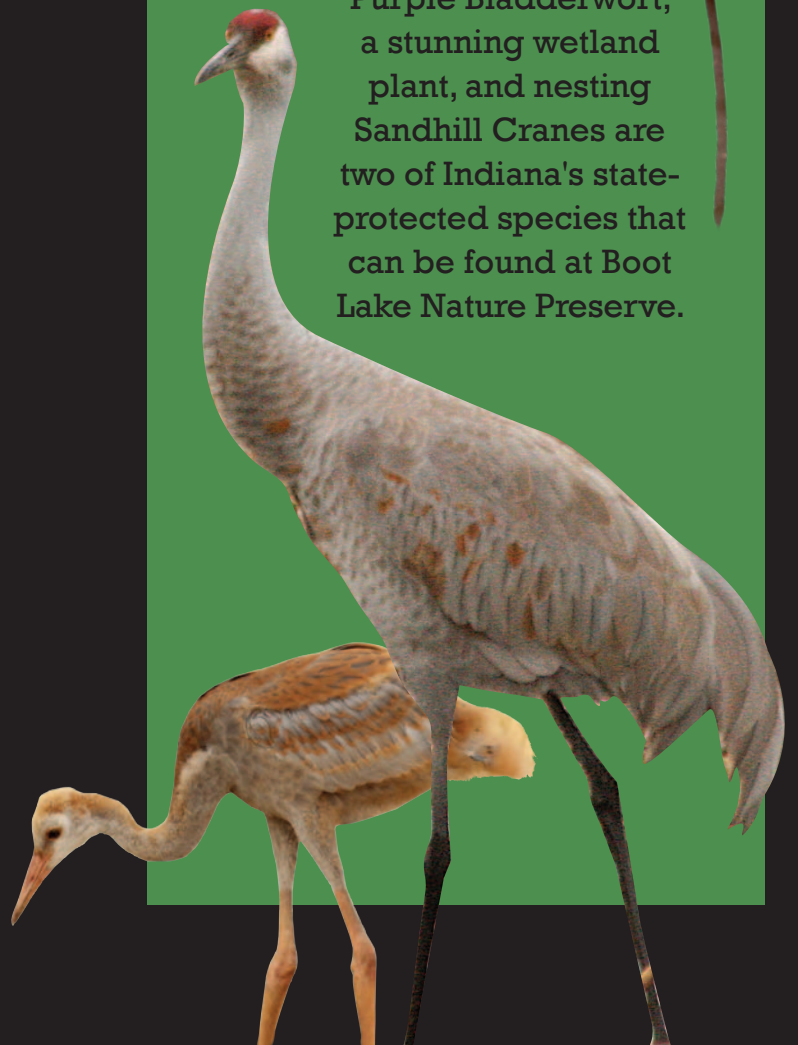
With the loss of the AmeriCorps program in 2008, the City struggled to



Protected Species



Purple Bladderwort, a stunning wetland plant, and nesting Sandhill Cranes are two of Indiana's state-protected species that can be found at Boot Lake Nature Preserve.



maintain the property. Discussions resumed on the transfer of the parcel to Elkhart County Parks, but resources were limited. Following the recession, the timing finally became right to take the next step.

Many individuals have had a hand in ensuring that this nature preserve remain open to the public. The Elkhart County Park and Recreation Board appreciates the support of Mayor Neese, the Elkhart City Council, Elkhart County Council, Elkhart County Commissioners, attorneys, neighbors, volunteers, visitors, and all who have supported the vision in keeping Boot Lake Nature Preserve a valued site for all.

A grant from the Community Foundation of Elkhart County, as well as other donations will allow improvements at the preserve. Donations are still being accepted to help with cleanup, roadway and parking improvements, restroom installation, replacing the wetland overlook, safety improvements, and other renovations. If you would like to help, please consider supporting our efforts by donating. To learn more, contact our administrative office at 574-535-6458, or email info@elkhartcountyparks.org.