

# Building Community | An ecology for all in Glen Helen

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On an early summer day, Glen Helen Executive Director and lifelong ecologist Nick Boutis stood by the large beaver dam that crosses the Yellow Spring Creek. As Boutis told the News, the Glen Helen beavers — the first in nearly 200 years — have a lot to teach us about the ways in which we commune with nature and one another. (Photo by Reilly Dixon)

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2 Comments

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

*This is the ninth in a series examining the meaning of community through the eyes of residents working to build and shape it in Yellow Springs.*

When a family of beavers moved into Glen Helen Nature Preserve in 2021, they immediately set to work damming up the Yellow Springs Creek.

Now, the busy fellers' wooden marvel — a long assemblage of not just flotsam and jetsam, but also the remains of trees that once towered nearby — spans several dozen feet near a frequently trafficked boardwalk. Though the critters themselves have been quite elusive, visitors of the Glen have been treated to an up-close-and-personal view of the beavers' handiwork.

According to Glen Helen Association Executive Director Nick Boutis, who by his own admission has a complicated relationship to these industrious furballs, this is the first time in nearly 200 years that beavers have inhabited Glen Helen.

On one hand, the beavers have given Boutis and his crews quite a bit of work; the boardwalk has needed to be modified several times to keep up with the rising water caused by the dam. On the other hand, the beavers unintentionally made a new, expansive wetland — a native habitat in Ohio that is under continual threat — and with that, the Glen has seen an explosion of new residents.

“Only twice in my 17 years on this job have I seen a green heron,” Boutis told the News in an interview earlier this summer. “Now, I’m up to four just this year.”

Beyond their inadvertent habitat creation, the beavers and their work have made something more intangible: They've created a perfect metaphor that exemplifies the ethos of this ongoing News series about community builders.

By bringing people together to witness the ongoing dam saga in real-time, and by furnishing a new home for long-gone species in the Glen, the beavers are, by no stretch of the imagination, "building community," Boutis said.

They remind us of the inextricable relationship between a people and a place.

As with the creation of a dam, building a community can be messy and fraught with tension, and according to Boutis, there may be no better place to witness that confluence of differing goals and interconnectedness than the 1,147 acres that compose the Glen Helen Nature Preserve.

To wit, over 125,000 visitors walk through the Glen each year, Boutis said.

### **The Glen, ever changing, ever growing**

Now in its 94th year since Hugh Taylor Birch gave Antioch College the initial 700-acre parcel in memory of his daughter, Helen Birch Bartlett, Glen Helen has undergone an apparent metamorphosis since Boutis became director in 2006.

Perhaps the most significant of its changes is the Glen gaining its independence. In September 2020, the preserve's longtime owner, Antioch College, sold the Glen to the Glen Helen Association nonprofit, or GHA, for \$2.5 million — an amount to be paid to the college over 10 years, which began with an initial payment of \$500,000.

As Boutis told the News, the Glen's sale came at a time of great uncertainty — even beyond the verdant confines of the preserve.

"The COVID-19 pandemic was the big, ugly catalyst," he said. "Because of it, we had to shut down all our school-based and Raptor Center programs, and we couldn't allow people to come into the Glen. We still had expenses, but there was no revenue."

When the GHA board — a group that had been in place for 60 years as a "friends" organization — took over operations, it was a "leap of faith," Boutis said. Improvements on trails and facilities were desperately needed, and at the time, only two staffers were running the preserve. The rest, including Boutis, were furloughed because of the pandemic-related reduction in operations.

"Two-and-a-half million dollars was more than we had ever raised, but if we didn't proceed with the sale, the Glen might not be here in the way it is today," Boutis said. "With the goal of continuing to provide the public with access to our nature preserve as a counterbalance to

that price tag, we knew damn well to move forward.”

Nearly three years past that tumultuous time, the Glen is in a good place, Boutis said. The GHA’s budget for 2024 is \$1.9 million — up from the \$700,000 allotted for 2021.

“It’s a sign of our growth and the continuing success of our programs,” he said. “A lot of the past couple of years has been all about carefully managing growth, rebuilding programs, reopening buildings and setting the Glen on a path that’ll be a thriving part of the community forever.”

Boutis said he now oversees 40 current employees at the Glen — not including the nearly 130 intermittent volunteers helping in the organization’s gift shop and pulling invasive species on a weekly basis.

Internal growth aside, Glen has also grown in physical size in recent years.

In 2015, the Glen purchased the 30-acre Camp Greene from the Girl Scouts of Western Ohio. Then, in the following years, the preserve incorporated 43 acres of the former Case family farm and 76 acres of the eastern section of the Village-owned Sutton Farm on S.R. 343. And earlier this year, the Glen acquired 22 acres from Sharon and David Neuhardt on an area of Whitehall Farm, between the northern boundary of the village and Ellis Park.

The primary intent of these land acquisitions, Boutis said, has come from an acknowledgement among him and the GHA board that the areas around the Glen are just as important to protect as the preserve itself.

“We recognize that most of the watershed of Yellow Springs Creek is outside of the Glen, and likewise, so is most of the watershed of Birch Creek,” he noted. “If we want healthy riparian habitats within the Glen, then we need to be able to work with our neighbors.”

Boutis added: “Bringing in these other properties strengthens our ability to protect the Glen’s resources as a coherent whole. Everything is connected.”

### **Unwanted residents**

As Boutis has told the News many times over the years, stewarding a nature preserve is no walk in the park.

In addition to keeping the trails safe, clean and accessible to the thousands of annual visitors, the land itself has to be carefully managed. By and large, that means devoting untold amounts of time dealing with the onslaughts of invasive species.

“Everywhere I go in the Glen, I see both the promise of the place and the magnitude of the work ahead — and that really comes to bear when I think of all the invasive species that have been here or are still to come,” Boutis said.

One of Boutis’ earliest challenges as executive director was weathering the devastation caused by the emerald ash borer, which doomed every single ash tree in the Glen. As a result of the beetles’ destructive work, the Glen lost almost 10% of its total trees, Boutis said.

“It swept over us like a tide,” he said grimly. “Over the last few years, we’ve had to make sure that those dead trees are as unlikely as possible to land on people, buildings, cars and powerlines.”

Boutis also pointed to the invasive lesser celandine that has a growing foothold in the Glen. Distinguished by its yellow flower petals and spade-shaped leaves, lesser celandine monopolizes nutrients and proliferates quickly through waterways.

“It’s tenacious,” Boutis said. “We’ve done a pretty good job of managing it, but it’s just waiting to explode. And if at any point our neighbors aren’t diligent in containing it in their yards, then it could really take over. But we’ve fought the hard fight against lesser celandine.”

Then there’s Asian stiltgrass — a battle Boutis feels is already lost.

“It’s a very fast-growing grass species, and once you know how to look for it, you’ll see it everywhere,” he said. “I don’t see us clawing ourselves back to a point where we can say it’s under control.”

And those are just the most devastating invasives Boutis highlighted; there’s still the known nuisances of honeysuckle, privet, euonymus, garlic mustard, rosa multiflora, knotweed and others — not to mention the growing deer population.

“Most of these plant species were introduced on purpose — not necessarily to the Glen, but to the whole region — for erosion control, weed management or ornamental or agricultural reasons,” Boutis said. “It’s a cautionary tale of human hubris.”

## **A complex community**

Despite all the challenges inherent in tending to all 1,147 acres, maintaining 15 miles of trails, overseeing the dozens of regular volunteers and staffers, and working with donors to secure operational funds, Boutis remains steadfast in his devotion to protecting the Glen in perpetuity.

“We still have a lot to do,” Boutis said with a bittersweet tone. “We are equal parts grateful for everything so many people have done to help the Glen reopen and beyond, but we are also aware of how much is left to do. Always.”

This never-ending work, though, doesn't stop Boutis from stopping from time to time to take in the natural beauty of the preserve. An avid "birder," Boutis draws regular optimism from the chirping choruses overhead.

Although a recent study from Cornell University revealed that the population of all North American birds has dropped by an alarming 30% since 1970, Boutis said the winged populations in the Glen are doing well.

"We have approximately 200 species of birds that have been reported in the Glen," he said. "To put that in context, there's no place in the county that comes even close to that."

Boutis pointed out that such a thriving bird population in the Glen has been made possible by the preserve's diversity of healthy habitats — one of which is the new beaver-made wetland. Recently, he heard a rare neotropical prothonotary warbler "singing its heart out" near the dam.

"There's beauty inherent in a complex system," Boutis waxed. "There may be people who think rows of endless corn are more attractive than the messy complexities in a diverse array of habitats. We have an ecological heritage here, and it's not always tidy."

The beavers, Boutis said, illustrate that point perfectly. As he noted, they've changed the Glen's habitat in ways that are different from what Boutis or his land management team would have done.

"They're girdling trees that we wouldn't have wanted to kill," he said. "But still, what's happening is the creation of something more. The beavers allow us to reflect on the conflicts and complexities that can arise in a connected system."

"By recognizing ourselves as more than just neighbors to Glen Helen, but also as intertwined participants in that ecological community," Boutis said, "we all have the ability to be community builders — just like the beavers."

His recommendations: Manage non-native species on private residences before they spread to the Glen, get involved in the upkeep of the preserve by volunteering to clear invasives or pick up litter, and, perhaps most importantly, "make better day-to-day decisions with the earth in mind."

"The story of the Glen is the story of Yellow Springs," Boutis said. "The human communities of one are inseparable from the ecological communities of the other. Everything is connected."

*Visit <http://www.glenhelen.org> to learn more about volunteer opportunities, donate to the organization or read more about the nature preserve's history.*

