



 **SEWISC**
Southeastern Wisconsin Invasive Species Consortium

2022 SWEAT EQUITY AWARDEE

Jean Weedman



How A Small Trail Can Make a Big Difference: Jean Weedman's SEWISC Sweat Equity Award, 2022

I was thrilled to co-nominate Jean Weedman for the recent 2022 Southeastern Wisconsin Invasive Species Consortium (SEWISC) Sweat Equity Award, which was presented during the November, 2022 SEWISC Educational Symposium in Milwaukee.

Jean is a remarkable leader, environmental educator, and native plant enthusiast who, among her many accomplishments, has devoted more than a decade to create and sustain an amazing community effort: the Eagle Nature Trail. I was so impressed by her commitment to this amazing project, I wrote a nonfiction book for middle-grade readers, *Restoring Prairie, Pond, and Woods: How a Small Trail Can Make a Big Difference*, which will be published by Holiday House on Earth Day, April 2023.

What inspired me while doing two years of research was a story that speaks to us all about the importance of SEWISC's work and environmental stewardship for our planet.

Once upon a time, there was an overgrown eight-acre lot filled with a thick tangle of invasive species and scattered garbage.

If you wanted to take the most direct shortcut between Eagle Elementary and Alice Baker Memorial Library, you had to bushwhack through this wilderness. No trail led through the tangled bushes and dense thickets of trees.

Nobody was sure what was inside the overgrown eight-acre lot. Local kids in Eagle claimed the place was filled with every kind of danger: pricklers, poison ivy, hornets, and poisonous snakes. Grown-ups warned, "There's nothing in there. Keep out."

In autumn 2009, the future changed for this mysterious wasteland. Volunteers decided to do something about the safety of students traveling by bike or on foot between the school and the library. No sidewalk lined School Road, which could be busy during certain times of the day and dangerous in icy winter conditions.

Why not cut a trail through the overgrown lot that was owned by the village and school district? Once the trees were cleared, this place would be a perfect soccer field. A playground, someone else suggested. What about a garden with donated plants from people's yards? No one knew how much any of these plans might cost. Money has always been tight in Eagle.

Jean Weedman had a bigger, better idea.

As a veteran educator with amazing curiosity, she decided to do a reconnaissance mission to see what was inside this forgotten wilderness. She shoved through the impossible buckthorn thickets. Just when she was about to give up, she made a surprising discovery: a single but spectacular purple coneflower plant and several scattered hoary vervains with pencil-thin flowers.

These native plants might be proof that prairie once thrived there.

Then along the edge of the trees, another surprise: two woodland natives, thimbleweed with its distinctive thimble shaped seed heads turning cottony, and the unmistakable deep purple clusters of black elderberries.

In the spring of 2010, she embarked on a more thorough plant inventory for the pathways committee. She returned to the vacant lot with Jerry Ziegler, President, SEWISC Board of Directors who was working for The Nature Conservancy.

As they made their way around litter and thick invasives they suddenly heard something astonishing.

Frog song.

Something hidden still flourished here.

Despite the way humans had neglected and abused this place, frogs had survived. The sign of a healthy wetland.

Jean and Jerry hurried across soggy ground that smelled of marshy ooze and water. In a clearing ahead was a patch of glittering water—a rare form of wetland called an ephemeral pond—home to fast-breeding amphibians and nearly microscopic creatures called fairy shrimp.

Without a connection to a spring or a stream, ephemeral ponds depend on snowmelt and rain. Because the ponds dry up in summer, they can't support fish. Without hungry fish, frog eggs have a chance to grow into tadpoles.

On their hike back that day, Jean found more woodland wonders: emerging Solomon's seal and the first unfolding heart-shaped leaves of blue and white violets.

The forgotten wilderness wasn't a dead zone after all.

Then the hard work began. Convincing the committee, coming up with a mission statement and a new plan to showcase three restored, interdependent ecosystems: an ephemeral pond, prairie, and woodland.

Jean was undaunted—despite having only a bare-bones budget and a loosely-affiliated group of community volunteers. The Eagle Nature Trail, however, began to take shape. A growing network of supporters – everyone from local volunteer firemen, principals, high school students, Boy Scouts—came together to pitch in to clear invasives, cut buckthorn, grade the trail, and plant native prairie, woodland, and wetland species.

Native restoration is local, hopeful work that requires “sweat equity” of the most important kind. And through it all, Jean has helped lead, manage, inspire, and push ongoing-maintenance and stewardship.

Today the Eagle Nature Trail serves as a pathway between the local Eagle Elementary School and the Alice Baker Memorial Library. The trail also helps connect artists and citizen scientists, community readers and explorers, students and their peers as an outdoor classroom.

I feel privileged as a writer and photographer to have witnessed Jean's energy and creativity as kids and from Eagle Elementary and adult volunteers from the community have helped with invasive plant removal during SEWISC's Annual Garlic Mustard Pull-A-Thon, planting, watering, and care for the prairie, woodland, and wetland. The kids' energy, delight, and enthusiasm have been especially amazing to behold.

Jean has told me that there's no way to know how a "teachable moment" outdoors can impact a child's environmental appreciation now and in the future. The same is true for the direct impact on adults who find wonder on the trail and return to help as volunteers with digging, planting, and invasive removal.

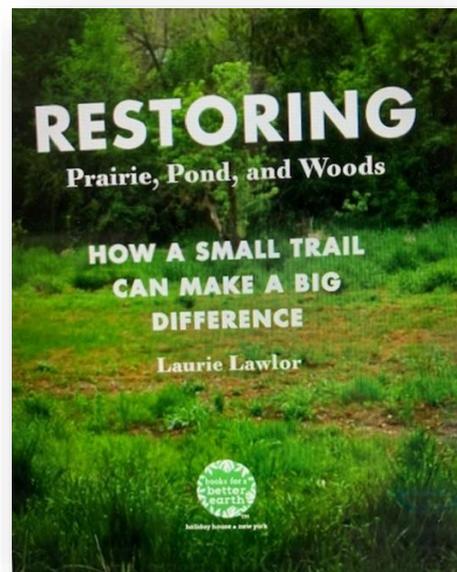
One thing is for certain. Jean's dedicated work has provided countless individuals with crucial opportunities to learn to love where they live so that they will care for the land. This direct experience, in my humble opinion, is the way to begin to save our planet. As Wisconsin conservationist Aldo Leopold so eloquently wrote, "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

By Laurie Lawlor

Email: laulawlor@aol.com

Website: www.laurielawlor.com

Phone: 847 702 4132



SEWISC Sweat Equity Award
Nomination Application 2022

Please complete the following form and questions, save as a Word document and return to: info@sewisc.org

Nominee: Jean Weedman		
Employer/Organization: (if applicable) Eagle Nature Trail	Position: (if applicable) Head of Trail Committee	
Street Address: W34S9768 Red Brae Drive	City: Mukwonago	Zip Code: 53149-9264
Work Phone Number:	Home Phone Number:	Email Address: wwedmantandj@aol.com

Nominator (Your Name): Laurie Lawlor (with additions by Jerry Ziegler & Jill Hapner)		
Employer/Organization: (if applicable)	Position: (if applicable)	
Street Address: 2103 Noyes St.	City: Evanston IL	Zip Code: 60201
Work Phone Number: 847 702 4132	Home Phone Number: 8477024132	Email Address: laulawlor@aol.com
This nomination is for exceptional: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Voluntary efforts <input type="checkbox"/> Professional efforts		

Describe your relationship to the nominee:

Laurie Lawlor has been involved in the Eagle Nature Trail as a children’s author covering the creation of this remarkable place for a book that will be published in April 2023 RESTORING PRAIRIE, POND AND WOODLAND (Holiday House); Since 2019, Laurie has worked closely with Jean’s organization as an observer, photographer, and writer. Together, they have also participated for many years as part of the Mukwonago River Initiative, a consortium of watershed preservation groups in SE Wisconsin. See: www.laurielawlor.com

Past Board President, Jerry Ziegler, identified Jean’s enthusiasm and talents many years ago and recruited her to serve on the SEWISC Board in 2016. SEWISC Executive Director, Jill Hapner, swiftly recognized the value of Jean’s organizational skills and creative expertise, giving Jean the opportunity to assist with any and all SEWISC programs as her schedule could accommodate. Jill enjoyed working with Jean during her Board term to improve existing SEWISC programs as well as to initiate new programs and continues to currently rely on expert advice from Jean.

Support for Nomination

- **Provide a summary statement including information about what the nominee has done to earn your nomination, considering the level of effort.**

Jean Weedman is a remarkable leader, inspirer and native plant enthusiast who has devoted more than a decade to creating and sustaining an amazing community effort: a trail from Eagle Elementary to the local public library. With little more than a bare bones budget, this outdoor classroom was created from a

Please complete the following form and questions, save as a Word document and return to: info@sewisc.org

neglected, invasive choked 8-acre, village lot. Today the trail is an environmental heritage site containing native prairie, woodland, and an ephemeral pond for children and adults to enjoy and explore.

Jean also shared her energy, creativity and vast expertise while serving on the SEWISC Board of Directors from 2016-2019. Many SEWISC programs and projects were underdeveloped due to lack of staff and Jean enthusiastically rolled up her sleeves to tackle those deficiencies. For example, regional Garlic Mustard Pull-A-Thon materials were developed and made available on the SEWISC website as a result of her many hours of work. Our successful Annual Symposiums along with our Where Ecology Meets Economy Forums were orchestrated in large part by Jean during her time on the Board. Jean's analysis of SEWISC fundraising campaigns helped to improve results and decrease staff and volunteer planning time. Her knack for understanding public perception and applying that knowledge to our outreach and educational efforts remains invaluable to our organization. She may have stepped down from the SEWISC Board, but Jean continues to contribute to the SEWISC mission and goals in many ways such as leading a trophy-winning Pull-A-Thon Team (twice!!) and serving as a much-needed advisor and graphic designer for our educational events (such as the 2022 Educational Symposium).

- **Why the nominee's contributions are ecologically significant?**

Now more than ever it's important to encourage kids to go outside and explore the natural world. The Eagle Nature Trail has offered students hands-on experience with invasive removal, planting, watering, and care of the three ecosystems—all essential in learning how to appreciate and steward this small part of our planet. The creation of this trail required inspired cooperation. But the on-going work of keeping up the prairie, woodland, and ephemeral pond is continuous and mandates stamina, creativity, and good humor. Jean has all these qualities in abundance. She was key in the move to create the trail in 2010 and continues doggedly to marshal resources of volunteers, grants, and material donations for its maintenance.

Current funding to support Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas, such as SEWISC, is sparse, which translates to inadequate staff time devoted to important programming. Dedicated and talented volunteers like Jean are therefore crucial to meeting the needs of our regional residents, governments and NPOs. Jean's many past and current contributions have permanently improved our organization structure, providing stability and capacity for further development.

- **Describe how the nominee has influenced people's actions or understanding of invasive species. Include approximate number of people influenced including ages (youth or adult) and type (professional, citizen, landowners, students, etc.) when possible.**

A retired, veteran teacher, Jean approaches the encounters students have with the Eagle Nature Trail as an opportunity to gain understanding, empathy and awe. We have witnessed dramatic moments of inspired teaching where students from grades K to 5 have worked cooperatively together in planting and watering, as well as invasive removal. The kids' energy, delight, and sheer enthusiasm are amazing to behold. As a writer and photographer, it was Laurie's privilege to participate in many of these trail events—from tree-watering for 9/11 commemoration to prairie planting. One of the big successes was the on-going Weed Warrior event that involved the whole school and focused on why and how invasives are a continuing challenge.

Jean has a talent for logically explaining the ecological cause and effect of invasive species invasions to any age group. Her inherent understanding of the problem is extremely affective through her pleasant, well-received verbal and written public communications. Jean was also remarkably effective when presenting analytic information regarding programming to her fellow SEWISC Board members. There is no way to estimate the extraordinary number of people influenced by her work.

Please complete the following form and questions, save as a Word document and return to: info@sewisc.org

- **Describe any other aspects of the nominee that are worth noting that are not mentioned above. (Consider things relating to invasive species like involvement in public or organizational policy, landowner group involvement, unique outreach efforts etc.)**

In 2019 and again in 2021, Eagle Nature Trail won the trophy award for the Annual SEWISC Garlic Mustard Pull-A-Thon, a great multiple-year honor to behold. Jean forms a Pull-A-Thon Team each year and demonstrates creative ways to make the workdays fun for her Team members which includes her normal trail volunteers along with school groups. In 2019, Jean engaged the Town of Eagle community by encouraging the local police and fire departments to have a pulling competition during one of their workdays!

- **What is the time period in which these actions occurred?**

Jean became interested in native plants in the late 1980s and her efforts to manage invasive species have been ongoing since that time. A massive invasive species removal effort was critical more than 10 years ago when the Eagle Nature Trail was created. The 8 acres were littered with garbage, in addition to buckthorn, box elder, dame's rocket, and garlic mustard. Since then, invasives remain a constant challenge, spring through fall, and are very much a priority on the trail for Jean and her volunteers.

- **What geographical locations are impacted by the nominee's action (local, regional, statewide)?**

Eagle, Wisconsin (through Jean's Eagle Nature Trail leadership) and throughout southeast Wisconsin and beyond through her SEWISC efforts SEWISC. Students and people from the Town of Eagle community as well as visitors are welcome to experience the nature trail. A [Garden Walk](#) sponsored by the Wild Ones this summer, 2022, was a resounding success with many people coming to admire the outdoor gem that's been so carefully created and preserved by Jean and her husband, Tom on their property in the Town of Eagle.

- **In your opinion, what is the potential cumulative/overall impact (current and future) of the nominee's actions?**

"As Jean herself readily admits in interviews, there's no way to know how a "teachable moment" can impact a child's environmental appreciation now and in the future. I would say that this is one of the strongest accolades for the trail: the opportunity it provides children to learn to love where they live so that they will care for the land. This direct experience is, in my humble opinion, the way we will save our planet." - Laurie Lawlor

A "teachable moment" can also permanently impact many adult lives, which Jean continues to successfully demonstrate with her extraordinary environmental stewardship efforts. Jean is truly deserving of this award and much, much more.