



# Natural LEADER, Nature CHAMPION

The Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve in Appleton is one of numerous sites throughout the Fox Valley that can be traced to the preservation work of the one-time Wisconsin legislator whose name it bears.

DAVID HORST

NUMEROUS SITES BEAR THE STAMP OF GORDON BUBOLZ, WHO MASTERED THE BUSINESS OF LAND PRESERVATION.

*David Horst*

For most Fox Valley residents, Gordon Bubolz is simply a name on the sign at a nature center near Appleton. The Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve is indeed named for the man responsible for that 775-acre chunk of white cedar swamp being set aside for environmental education and enjoyment of nature.

But it would take 10 signs to mark all of the land preserved for future generations by this former Republican state senator and second-generation insurance executive.

In 1991, a joint Wisconsin Assembly and Senate resolution was passed following the death of Bubolz the previous year, recognizing him for his extensive work in setting aside lands for public use. Bubolz saw no problem carrying the labels of conservationist and conser-

vative together; protecting the Earth and promoting efficient government were both part of his agenda.

The Legislature honored Bubolz for raising funds and helping to acquire what are now four nature centers, four county parks and High Cliff State Park. Those sites, along with one other not on the Legislature's list, account for 4,600 acres of valuable habitat and scenic areas preserved for the public largely through Bubolz's handiwork.



This uncredited photo of Gordon Bubolz appears in his autobiography, which notes it is from Singer Island, Florida, circa 1972.

### Bubolz's background

Gordon A. Bubolz was born in 1905 and grew up on a farm in the Seymour area. That's where he developed his love of nature, according to his daughter, Milly Rugland, and son, John Bubolz, both of Appleton. Their father's refuge as a child was a swampy woodlot on the farm, where he would go to reflect and observe nature.

"That's where his ethic began," John Bubolz said.

The family enjoyed nature-centered vacations in northern Wisconsin and the western U.S., and also made an annual trip to the farm to plant trees.

As a boy on the farm, Gordon was in charge of raising chickens and was allowed to keep any prize money he won for showing them. He used that money to help pay his way through Lawrence University in Appleton, Rugland said.

After graduating from Lawrence, Bubolz studied business at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and earned a law degree from the University of Wisconsin. He eventually took over the family business, succeeding his father, Julius, as president and CEO of Home Mutual Insurance Co. Under Gordon's watch, the business grew into SECURA Insurance Companies, a \$400 million property and casualty insurer based in Appleton.

In 1945, Bubolz won election to the Wisconsin Senate, defeating Republican party favorites in a primary on his way to general election victory. He served in the Senate until 1953.

During his eight-year tenure in the Senate, Bubolz chaired the state Conservation Commission and the advisory council of the Department of Resource Development, predecessors to the Department of Natural Resources. He also advocated for regional planning commissions and helped bring efficiencies to several state departments, including in welfare and state investment practices.

But it was after his government service — working through a nonprofit organization he founded in 1974 called Natural Areas Preservation Inc. (NAPI) — that Bubolz became a land-acquiring force for nature. He used the cordial approach and cunning deal-making skills developed in years of politics and business to preserve special places he thought the public should be able to enjoy.

Bubolz's approach was simple, his son said: Identify a site to be preserved, then generate the local support, raise the necessary funds and negotiate with the appropriate government entities to seal the deal.

Bubolz's daughter added that he never quibbled over an owner's asking price for land he wanted to preserve, unless it

was outrageous.

"He wouldn't lose needed land forever to save \$5,000," she said.

### Acquisition skills on display

Bernie Brouchoud saw Bubolz's land acquisition techniques up close. Brouchoud, whose passion for birding spans decades, was leading an early-1970s effort in Manitowoc County to acquire an area of wooded swales that offered prime birding territory. He met Bubolz when the executive came for a brat fry at the shack Brouchoud and his wife used as their getaway in the woods.

"Wonderful guy," Brouchoud said.

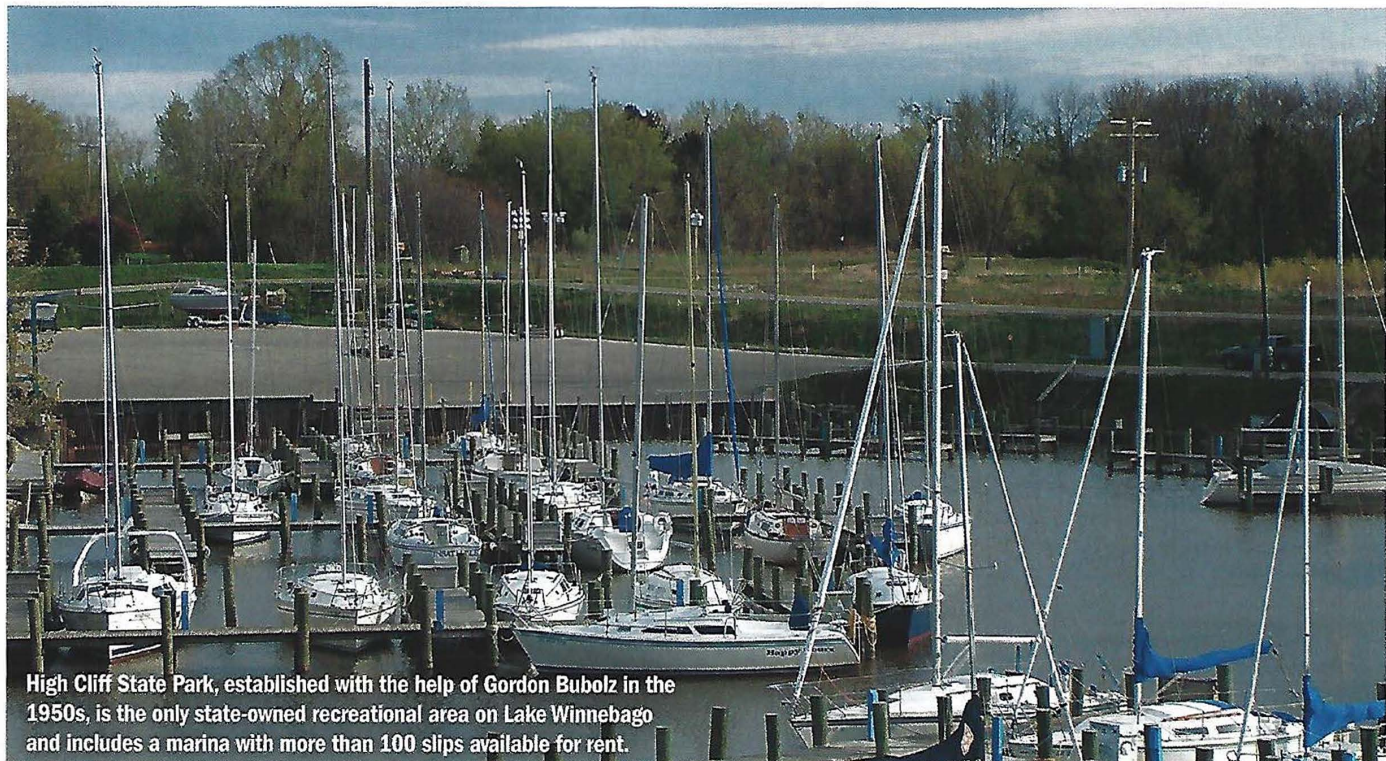
As additional land became available for what had officially turned into Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve, Bubolz would buy it through NAPI and Brouchoud would go about raising money to pay back the group.

"I was never a fundraiser," Brouchoud said, "but I learned in a hurry."

Using that approach, Woodland Dunes grew to 1,200 acres, with more than \$1 million raised for land acquisition. Bubolz had an undeniable presence, Brouchoud said, but took a gentle approach in his dealings regarding Woodland Dunes.

"We did kitchen-table deals," Brouchoud said. "We paid what the owner wanted."

When Woodland Dunes opened,



High Cliff State Park, established with the help of Gordon Bubolz in the 1950s, is the only state-owned recreational area on Lake Winnebago and includes a marina with more than 100 slips available for rent.

DAVE BENISH



KRISTINE SCHUETZE PHOTOS

**A new \$5.5 million educational building at the Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve provides expanded exhibit space, a nature nook public library and student research center, toddler play-and-learn area, meeting rooms, banquet facility and more.**

Brouchoud became its first executive director. Bubolz also created a title for Brouchoud and put him on the payroll of Bubolz's insurance company. The arrangement existed for more than 18 years until Bubolz's death.

Bubolz's goal, Brouchoud said, was for every county in northeast Wisconsin to have at least one nature center. His style was to be friendly with everyone, but outlasted by no one, his daughter added.

"He never gave up," she said.

### Pushing for parks

Examples of Bubolz's successful negotiations are many. In one case in the mid-1960s, he was working with Wisconsin Electric Power Co. on the donation of a picturesque section of the Embarrass River in Shawano County, where the company had abandoned a dam and hydroelectric power plant. County commissioners wanted the land for a park but were worried about possible liability they would incur for a waterfall included in the acquisition.

Bubolz raised the issue with officials of the utility and convinced them to throw in \$1,000 for future claims, and the 54-acre Hayman Falls County Park was created.

In perhaps his most important acquisition, in 1956, Bubolz wanted the state to acquire land along the north shore of Lake Winnebago from a limestone operation that had shut down. He raised \$27,000, a portion of the purchase price, through the High Cliff Forest Park Association but was told the state had no funds to cover the balance.

As Bubolz described it in his autobiography, "Once Upon a Time — Gordon A. Bubolz, His Life and Vision," he convinced the chairman of the state Conservation Commission that the high ridge overlooking the lake was technically part of the northern Kettle Moraine area. That allowed the commission to tap into \$4.5 million in reserves the state had set aside for that area.

The state acquired the first 288 acres of what became High Cliff State Park, including 10,000 feet of Lake Winnebago shoreline, from Western Cement and Lime Co. for \$245,000.

Bubolz didn't always get his way. When the land near Appleton known as "Center Swamp" was purchased by NAPI for a nature center, Bubolz resisted a suggestion that it be named for him. The NAPI advisory committee met on

the subject and members insisted that Bubolz step down temporarily as group chair and leave the room.

When Bubolz was called back, he was informed they had voted for the name Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve, and he was then able to reassume his position as NAPI chair.

### Allies across the aisle

In his dealings through the years, Bubolz didn't hesitate to work with people along the political spectrum. Among frequent visitors to the Bubolz home, his daughter said, were Democrat Gaylord Nelson and Republican Warren Knowles, both colleagues from the state Senate and eventual Wisconsin governors. Nelson also went on to serve in the U.S. Senate.

To young Milly and John, Nelson and Knowles were just dad's co-workers. Rugland said the three would talk together about how to accomplish the things they wanted to benefit the people of Wisconsin. Bubolz was outspoken about his beliefs, his children said, and they considered their father an environmentalist at the time.

"He'd basically give a speech to anyone who would listen," Rugland said.

One of the topics Bubolz was most passionate about was the need to clean up the Fox River as it flows from Appleton north to Green Bay. He drew the ire of fellow businessmen from the region's dominant paper industry, which used the river to dispose of industrial waste. Rugland recalled at one point having to be taken to high school in an unmarked police car because of threats against her father and his family.

Bubolz was named Wisconsin Conservationist of the Year in 1977 and was honored by the UW College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in 1978. At UW-Stevens Point, a scholarship is named for him within the College of Natural Resources.

Rugland also remembers her father being nominated by Nelson for a National Wildlife Federation award. Rugland attended the awards ceremony with her dad, who told Nelson she was a good daughter — except, he said, that she insisted on voting for Nelson, a Democrat. <sup>60</sup>

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## LEGACY OF GORDON BUBOLZ

Here is a list of state natural treasures that can be attributed to the efforts of Gordon A. Bubolz.

**Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve:** This important lowland forest area was known as “Center Swamp” because of its location in the town of Center. The original investment in the property came from Bubolz’s Natural Areas Preservation Inc. (NAPI) in 1971 – \$33,000 to purchase 488 acres. The preserve now features 775 acres and operates without any government subsidy, as Bubolz preferred. A new \$5.5 million, 18,000-square-foot nature center building has been constructed, with funds raised through a capital campaign. Contributions have included \$100,000 from the Fox Cities Convention and Visitors Bureau and \$250,000 from Menasha Corp. Foundation. In addition, local electrical contractor Faith Technologies Inc. has constructed and donated a microgrid system integrating solar, battery and micro-turbine power in what is expected to make the nature center energy-independent; 4815 N. Lynndale Drive, Appleton, [bubolzpreserve.org](http://bubolzpreserve.org).

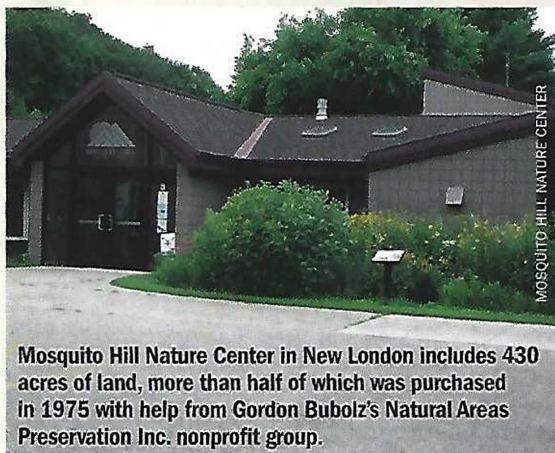
**High Cliff State Park:** Bubolz led a private effort in the mid-1950s to acquire the land on the north shore of Lake Winnebago after a limestone mining operation there closed. The state acquired the first 288 acres, including 10,000 feet of shoreline, from Western Cement and Lime Co. for \$245,000 in 1956 and High Cliff State Park opened in 1957. The park has since grown to 1,187 acres with a campground, harbor, effigy mounds, observation tower and 16 miles of trails; N7630 State Park Road, Sherwood, [dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/highcliff](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/parks/name/highcliff).

**Fallen Timbers Environmental Education Center:** The 440-acre nature center between Black Creek and Seymour is owned by six school districts and primarily used by area school groups. It was acquired for \$60,000 in 1975, mostly from Fort Howard Paper Co. The woods there had been hit hard by Dutch elm disease and the sale of standing dead timber helped to pay for the land’s acquisition. Its unusual name came from the students who often heard limbs dropping from the dead trees; W4531 Robin Road, Black Creek, [www.cesa6.org/services/fallen-timbers](http://www.cesa6.org/services/fallen-timbers).

**Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve:** Local advocates worked with NAPI to acquire the first 40 acres of this preserve near Manitowoc in 1974 at a cost of \$6,000. None was more influential than Bernie Brouchoud, an avid birder who became the nature center’s first executive director, serving until 2004. Today, Woodland Dunes comprises more than 1,300 acres, including 387 acres of the Woodland Dunes State Natural Area; 3000 Hawthorne Ave., Two Rivers, [woodlanddunes.org](http://woodlanddunes.org).

**Waukau Creek Nature Preserve:** This walleye spawning grounds on Rush Creek near Omro connects Rush Lake with the upper Fox River through steep-walled ravines. NAPI bought the land and gave it to Winnebago County, and a 50-acre park was dedicated in 1975, with Bubolz in attendance. There are now 64 acres with trails and ravines down to Rush Creek; 2987 Delhi Rd., north of Waukau, [www.co.winnebago.wi.us/parks/nature-preserves/waukau-creek](http://www.co.winnebago.wi.us/parks/nature-preserves/waukau-creek).

**Hobbs Woods Nature Area:** In the 1970s, NAPI along with the Winnebago County Conservation Club raised \$14,000 of the \$55,000 purchase price for 50 acres along Parson’s Creek, with Fond du Lac County covering the balance. The land, near Fond du Lac, features a trout stream through a climax hardwood forest, plus trails for hiking and cross-country skiing. Overuse in recent years has raised concerns regarding the property, and maintenance efforts have been ongoing; N4197 Hickory Road, south of Fond du Lac, [www.fdlco.wi.gov/departments/departments-n-z/parks-trails/county-parks/hobbs-woods](http://www.fdlco.wi.gov/departments/departments-n-z/parks-trails/county-parks/hobbs-woods).



Mosquito Hill Nature Center in New London includes 430 acres of land, more than half of which was purchased in 1975 with help from Gordon Bubolz’s Natural Areas Preservation Inc. nonprofit group.

**Mosquito Hill Nature Center:** This striking geologic feature rising above the otherwise flat area of Outagamie County was formed by ancient volcanic activity. More than 40 years ago, a 238-acre tract was up for sale for \$25,000. After county officials determined it was only worth \$14,000 of public money, NAPI kicked in the remaining \$11,000 and Outagamie County acquired the land as a county park in 1975. It now covers 430 acres near the Wolf River and includes three miles of trails for hiking and snowshoeing, as well as space for meetings and educational programs; 3880 Rogers Road, east of New London, [mosquitohill.com](http://mosquitohill.com).

**Hayman Falls County Park:** A 54-acre parcel on the Embarrass River in the Shawano County community of Caroline was donated by Wisconsin Electric Power Co., following negotiations facilitated by Bubolz. The abandoned hydroelectric dam left by the power company has since been removed. The park name implies the presence of a waterfall, but the American Whitewater Association says it’s actually a half-mile rapids, usually rated at Class III, depending on water level; N4386 Hayman Falls Lane, Marion, [www.co.shawano.wi.us](http://www.co.shawano.wi.us) (type “Hayman Falls” in search line).

**Mount Morris Hills County Park:** At 383 acres, this wooded park accounts for more than half the county park land in Waushara County. It was acquired in the early 1960s through the efforts of a local group known as Mount Morris Hills Inc., aided by Bubolz, who at the time was chairman of the Wolf River Basin Regional Planning Commission. Supporters hoped it would eventually become a state park but instead it has retained county status; N3876 County Road G, Wild Rose, [www.co.waushara.wi.us/pView.aspx?id=14527](http://www.co.waushara.wi.us/pView.aspx?id=14527).

**Mukwa Wildlife Area:** Not on the list in the 1991 state Senate resolution honoring Bubolz is this marshy waterfowl hunting area outside of New London, created with help from Bubolz and NAPI. The Wisconsin Conservation Commission originally acquired it in 1964 to develop a waterfowl impoundment, but prohibitive costs and flood implications for the city of New London prevented the impoundment from moving forward. The state-owned wildlife area now features 1,300 acres, including the 171-acre Mukwa Bottomland Forest State Natural Area; County Highway X, west of New London, [dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/wildlifeareas/mukwa.html](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/wildlifeareas/mukwa.html).