

## **Restoring Our Natural Legacy: A Pilot Project on Merkel**

For generations, the charm of Gates Mills has been rooted in its pristine landscapes, lush woodlands, and dedication to conservation. As stewards of this remarkable environment, the Gates Mills Land Conservancy remains committed to protecting and restoring the natural heritage that defines our community. Today, we face a growing challenge: the spread of invasive species that threaten the delicate balance of our local ecosystems.

### **The Invasive Challenge**

Our woodlands were never designed to handle the rapid spread of invasive species such as burning bush, buckthorn, and privet. These plants, introduced over time for ornamental use, have now taken root in ways that choke out native trees like tulip trees and cottonwoods. The consequences are severe—loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, and a disrupted natural regeneration process.

One of the most affected areas in our community is the GMLC Merkel property, where invasive species have taken an extreme toll. Without intervention, the dense thicket of non-native vines and shrubs will continue to smother native tree seedlings, delaying forest regeneration for centuries. To combat this, GMLC in collaboration with experts and local partners, has launch an intensive restoration effort to reclaim this critical natural space.

This work would not be possible without the dedication of our residents, conservationists, and partners such as Chagrin River Watershed Partners, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Holden Arboretum, Cleveland Metroparks and other local naturalists. We are also grateful for the expert insights of Judy Semroc, Metroparks renowned naturalist who has assessed the Merkle property and will continue to monitor its progress.

Judy has meticulously identified 121 species on the Merkel property including every type of tree, plant, insect, mammal and bird. She has provided valuable guidance, such as recognizing the brown creeper as a species of “special concern” due to its reliance on tree trunks for shelter and feeding. Judy has also emphasized the ecological importance of preserving native wild grapevines, which, due to their impressive size and age, serve as excellent roosting habitats for owls. Through Judy’s studies, we will track the resurgence of native plant species and wildlife over the coming years.

### **Being Part of the Solution**

We encourage all GMLC members and Gates Mills residents to take an active role in this restoration journey. If you are interested in taking action on your own property, we can help with resources to assist you in identifying and managing invasive species. Every effort contributes to the larger mission of land preservation in our community.