

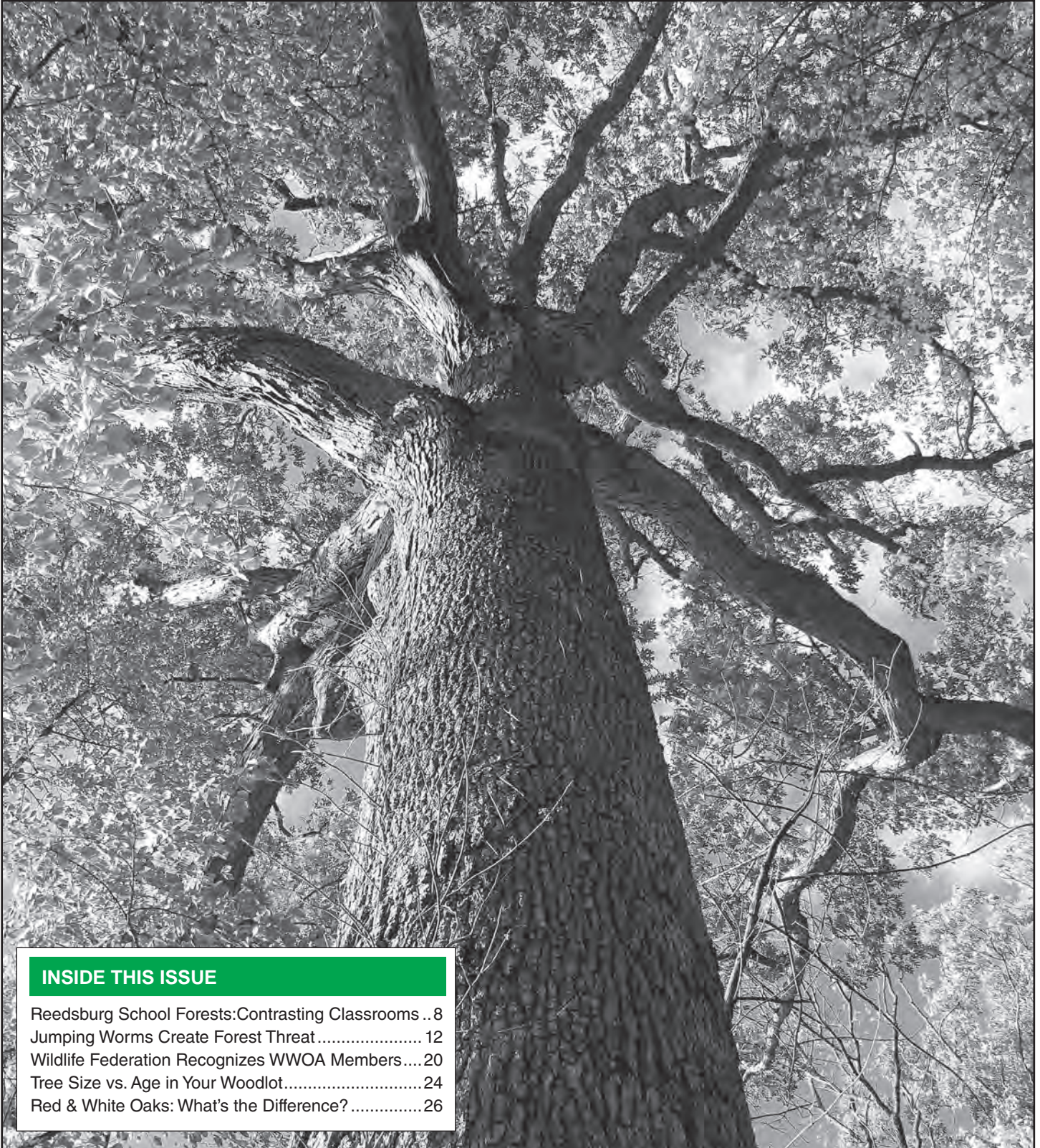
Wisconsin



Woodlands

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Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today



Students rest as teacher Dana Westedt, now retired, gives some instructions at the Hartje Learning Center.

Reedsburg School Forests are contrasting outdoor classrooms

By Stephen Schmidt

Wisconsin's Driftless Area, the region unglaciated in the last ice age, encompasses much of the western half of the state, including Sauk County in WWOA's Bad Axe Chapter. A glance at a satellite image clearly shows the area is defined by deep river valleys and relief, patterns not unlike frost formations on windows on bitterly cold winter days.

Unlike the checkerboard pattern of agricultural lands to the north and east, farming here is characterized by the need to protect the soil from erosion with crops following contour lines, also obvious from above.

Reedsburg Area School District is fortunate to have two contrasting outdoor classrooms in Sauk County: the Gurvin J. Romoren School Forest and the Hartje Learning Center.

Originally named the Abelman School Forest in 1944, the forest was renamed in 1988 after former

Reedsburg school teacher, Gurvin J. Romoren, Sr., who died in 1987. According to a 1997 stewardship forestry plan, the 80-acre property is a northern dry forest on glacial outwash sand and relatively flat terrain, which is unusual for Sauk County. In the northern portion of this forest, rows of red pines dominate the canopy with white pines and oaks ready to take their place in this early intermediate forest.

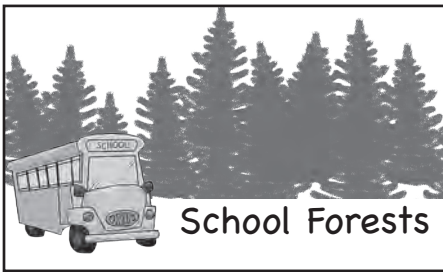
This land was once the primary school forest, but due to its distance from the current schools compared to Hartje and its lack of facilities, it is visited much less now and is primarily managed for timber. A few logging trails allow for access of much of the Romoren School Forest, but one may have to venture off the trail past a few briars and blackberry thorns to see the American chestnuts in the southern area of the property.

Hartje Learning Center was a gift from lumber and construction business

Forest Fast Facts

- Original certification: Gurvin J. Romoren School Forest (1944) and Hartje Learning Center (1996)
- Total acres: 80 and 128, respectively
- District enrollment: 2,754 in 2016-17
- Student trips to Hartje in 2017-18: 3,340
- Website: <https://www.rsd.k12.wi.us/district/hartje-outdoor-learning-center.cfm>
- Contact: Science teacher Amy Workman, 608-768-8928, Ext. 1147; aworkman@rsd.k12.wi.us

owners Virgil and Edith Hartje in 1986 (80-acres) and 1996 (48-acres). Former farm cropland was planted with pines and former grazing land has been allowed to mature into the woods seen



today. In contrast to Romoren, Hartje has much more topographic relief and habitats. Combined with the large, mixed hardwood stands and various pine plantations, the relief makes for a great hike in Hartje’s 80-acre south parcel. Students and community members alike have multiple and diverse outdoor educational and recreational opportunities. High school cross-country meets in fall and groomed public ski trails in winter challenge athletes to stay fit at the school forest. Fourth grade students help to produce upward of 40 gallons of maple syrup in the new collection and production shed. Lest they forget how sap used to be collected, students still carry some buckets and bags from individual trees to the sugar shack.

Hartje’s 48-acre northwestern parcel includes a wetland sedge meadow complex that includes a pond, Twin Creek and also a low ropes course built into a pine plantation. High school science teacher Amy Workman gives students opportunities to be citizen scientists as she develops longterm wetland studies as part of the Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment program. High school students also sift through trail camera photos of wildlife as part of the Snapshot Wisconsin program, which seeks to quantify and catalog wildlife populations and ranges across the state. More information about these programs may be found at: <https://www.globe.gov/> and <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/research/projects/snapshot>.

Other Hartje school forest activities and events include:

- Students implementing buckthorn control methods, including a trial method where trees are cut in late fall and suffocated with plastic bags sealed onto the stumps.
- Art students put on a fall fundraiser called Haunted Hartje, which



Photo by Gary Williams

Elementary students practice teamwork at the Hartje Learning Center.



includes Halloween-themed arts and crafts and activities followed by a trail hike for those who enjoy the thrill of being spooked in the woods.

- A fifth grade Civil War Day and a Youth Conservation Day, both held annually.
- Future plans include an annual community maple syrup event.

Clearly, Reedsburg’s schools and community are actively pursuing wonderful outdoor education and recreation at their school forests. Even so, teachers and the community members are working together with support from staff at LEAF, Wisconsin’s K-12 Forestry Education Program, to write a school forest education plan that will offer all district students a more

comprehensive, standards-based curriculum.

Consider a visit to these forests that are open to the public.

Directions: Hartje Learning Center is a 7-minute drive north of Reedsburg on County V. The southern unit parking lot is on the east side of V, along with the main classroom building and recently upgraded restrooms. The northern unit parking area is a few hundred yards north and on the west side of V. A tunnel under County Road V provides a handy walking path between the two units.

Gurvin J. Romoren School Forest is in Rock Springs on the west side of Terrytown Lane halfway between Hogsback Road and Excelsior Drive. A small portion of this property is across the road.



Stephen Schmidt, a state-certified science educator and instructor at Northcentral Technical College, is also an educational outreach specialist for LEAF, Wisconsin’s K-12 Forestry

Education Program.