15 minutes away in Perrysburg, so we come here all the time. It's very informal. We just show up and wait for everyone else."

Ralph admits he often has no idea who will land on the shore of the four-acre "estate," which has no electricity or running water and four small cabins.

"We don't worry about it," he says. "We just relax and take it as it comes."

The island had five owners before the two couples bought it in 2001, after the death of Ralph's friend G. Parks "Bud" McNaull. By that time, the Girkins were familiar figures on Little Sisters.

"We spent a lot of time out there with Bud, starting about 12 years ago," says Ralph, 51. "I did a lot of work, cutting down trees and building the cabins. Before he died, he gave me a lifelong lease for a buck a year."

Visitors know the few rules: Take your trash when you leave and no hunting.

"The island next to ours is Grassy Island," says Joyce, who declines to give her age. "It's bigger but is left as a preserve. There are over 150 deer living there, and sometimes in the early morning we see the deer families swim over to our island. It's such a beautiful sight. There is a family of bald eagles over there, parents and two young ones, that we get to watch."

Joyce Girkins (left) asks her husband, Ralph, if he knows how many people plan to visit the island on this night. Ralph thought 20. He was short by 10.

Guests are content to enjoy the surroundings. Although occasionally, says Joyce, a few brave folks venture into the muddy river for a swim. She never gets *that* hot.

Ralph has brought rock and country bands to perform in the picnic area for private parties, held charity events for Toledo notables and spent many lazy days and nights watching the world go by.

He loves to watch the water of the Maumee move on its meandering path to Lake Erie, carrying boaters past his door. He waves to the tour boat, The *Sandpiper*, that regularly carries tourists past the retreat and has occasionally dropped off guests who needed a lift.

Most of the island is a tangle of swamp and vegetation. The land that the two couples and their friends have tamed is less than an acre of trimmed lawn, tiny gardens and transplanted trees. Keeping that space from nature is a constant battle.

"It's amazing how fast things grow out here. These were seedlings just last year, and now look at them," says Ralph, pointing to a stand of trees 8 feet tall and higher. "If we let part of the property go for even a week, we get huge growth."

Three of the cabins sit on the skinniest part of the island, less than 100 feet from one shore to the other. Ralph and his friends built the cabins using wood they hauled over from the mainland. The main building on the island, the "Island House," is a rough-hewn party center with a porch.

There are many whimsical touches on the island: Unconnected phones, newspaper delivery tubes, water spigots nailed to solid walls and a real fire hydrant without plumbing.

"We put that in because my insurance guy asked where the nearest hydrant was located," says Ralph. "I said we had one right on the island."

Ralph doesn't worry much about damage or theft. Almost everything on the island can be easily repaired or replaced. Also, it seems as if there's always someone on the island, a friend or relative who wants to spend the night.

The river occasionally creeps up on the land, once reaching the front porch of their cabin.

Ralph looks eastward toward a clump of debris sticking out of the brown water. "See that?" he asks. "That was a tiny island just three years ago. It's gone now."

He takes a philosophical view of his bit of paradise, which exists at the whim of the river. He doubts that the Maumee will ever completely reclaim the island, but to be safe, he and his friends plant trees with strong roots on the swampy side of the island to stop erosion of the shoreline and frequently cut the weeds and grass to keep it from going wild.

"Once I talked about selling the place because I was tired of the upkeep," says Ralph. "Immediately, my son Matthew and his friends jumped in to help. He spends a lot of time here."

Matthew, 24, who works at the Universal Tube & Rollform Equipment Corporation owned by his father, just smiles when asked about the advantages of having a private island as a playground.

Joyce and Ralph sit on the gnarled trunk of a willow tree that is parallel to the ground and look into the water. It's early on a Saturday afternoon, and they expect about 20 friends and relatives to show up any time with food and drink and stories to tell. They'll fire up the grill, have dinner and watch the sun go down.

"It's pretty nice out here, isn't it?" Ralph asks with a grin, the sound of water lapping at his feet and birds singing in the trees. ■

Plain Dealer reporter Michael Sangiacomo would love his own island but becomes seasick on boats. He may be reached at 216-999-4890 or through magmail@plaind.com.

Ralph Girkins pilots his boat to the island, which has been privately held since 1833, when John Pray was given the land by order of President Andrew Jackson.

Crossword Solutions

Is There A Problem Here?

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New York Times

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