

Illinois
May 2011

Wetlands can successfully benefit the land, wildlife and can secure the future of productive Illinois farmland.



Pelicans swimming in a wetland, band together, forcing fish to shore then scoop them up.

Photo: NRCS

Feature Story

The Cranes!

Let's Celebrate the REAL Wetland Story

In February, 2011, a big story emerged in Illinois when two unusual looking birds were seen foraging in a recently restored floodplain. They were migrating whooping cranes--one of the most endangered wetland-dependant species in North America. It was big news, but there's more to it than just the endangered birds.

While the initial photo of the cranes was extremely exciting, with a closer look we can see an even bigger story. While the cranes were searching for food in the far background, mallard ducks were feeding in the shallower water with teal, shoveler and pintail ducks in the shallowest areas. The significance of this is that the wetland had already begun to support a diverse group of bird species, each with their specific needs.

Proximity of this floodplain with other wetland sites is another important feature that demonstrates the positive and immediate usability for our traveling friends. Just as we need

hotels, restaurants and gas stations placed along the highway to help us travel across the country, these wet areas work in the same way. Migrating birds move extensive distances and need places to stop, rest and refuel for the next leg of their trip.

The new floodplain that gained recognition for helping the whooping cranes was a product of the President's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, where flood-prone cropland was purchased and restored to its former wet state. Similarly, since 1992, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has offered options from the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to landowners who have agricultural land in these wet locations. Using this and other voluntary NRCS programs such as the Emergency Watershed Protection program-Floodplain Easement (FPE), Illinois has enhanced or restored almost 100,000 acres dedicated to wetlands throughout the state.



Migratory birds - egrets, geese, ducks, and shorebirds - find a recently restored wetland. In the background is an irrigated cornfield. This shows how a diverse wetland can support a variety of migratory birds while still fitting into an agricultural landscape.

Photo: NRCS

Helping People Help the Land

Not all wetland projects are floodplains; some may be wet depressions in cropped fields or edges of fields allowed to be reestablished. In Lawrence County alone, there are 23 WRP and FPE easement sites covering 5,566 acres. Even though not all are located next to each other, they are close enough to re-create what used to be a continuous section of shallow water where birds and other wildlife can find food and shelter. The floodplain that drew so much attention with the whooping cranes is located within a contiguous area of 453 acres of floodplains along the Embarras River.

The whooping crane event was not by accident, nor was it a surprise. It shows that when we restore and protect wetlands like these, the benefits come quickly.

To take it a step further, the land alongside the floodplain can often be converted back to a natural upland habitat. The upland habitat supports native grasses and plants that produce food and shelter for other wildlife such as pollinators, mammals, and game birds like quail. Insects and aquatic life flourish when the plants protect the land from erosion and siltation of the wetland below it. Bottom line, these two different habitats complement each other by completing the whole package.

Not just for the Birds!

Floodplain benefits go far beyond just migrating birds and wildlife. They play an important role for humans as well. From a monetary view, if you compare the cost of flood and crop insurance on a yearly basis, with just one payment for a floodplain easement and restoration, you have saved millions in tax dollars. We often take for granted the broader view of what natural resources like floodplains give us and our communities when properly restored. When done correctly, this is how your tax dollars work for all of us.

Floodplains benefit people and wildlife by:

- holding water from heavy rains, preventing it from flowing downstream and causing damage to roads, communities and agricultural lands, including possible life-threatening events.
- filtering the water of excess nutrients and impurities; they process organic wastes before water re-enters the ground water or other water bodies.
- enhancing communities by providing open space, restoring and enhancing forest lands, creating recreational opportunities, or offering simple enjoyment of their aesthetic beauty.
- providing a diverse habitat and homes for a variety of species which may not - or cannot - exist in any other habitat. Many federal and state listed endangered and threatened species live in these locations as we have experienced in Illinois.

The next time you see a flock of migrating birds, ducks or other waterfowl, or happen on some endangered species, remember that we are responsible for their survival or their decline. Giving them back the land they need to survive is what voluntary wetland restoration is all about. May is designated as Wetland Month and what better way to celebrate.

If you think you have land that might be a candidate for the Wetlands Reserve Program, contact your local USDA Service Center, NRCS or Soil and Water Conservation District office.

Restoration of the wetland



Floodplain easement in May 2010, before any restoration work begins. Photo NRCS



Floodplain easement in October 2010, during restoration construction. Photo NRCS



Floodplain easement in February 2011, whooping cranes were found feeding. Photo Landowner

To read more about the whooping crane story and the Recovery Act Floodplain Restoration projects, go to www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp_ewp/wrp_index.html

For more information on Illinois NRCS, go to www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/