CONSERVATION Showcase

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Neglected Forest Now Picture Perfect

Tom and Julita Pollard Thin Southern Iowa Trees to Reinvigorate Hardwood Stand

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A recently completed tree thinning project on 90 acres of Clarke County woodlands will provide many benefits to a hardwood stand of hickory, oak and walnut trees neglected for decades.

Tom and Julita Pollard, who call both Des Moines and Osceola home, inherited the forestland in 2008. Tom's family owned the property – adjacent to the Stephens State Forest Bird Conservation Area – for more than 70 years. "This land has always been in timber," said Tom. "My dad tried many years ago to pasture it off, but without success."

The couple purchased an additional 10-acre unmanaged oak savanna from a neighbor and longtime family friend. The difference between an oak savannah and woodlands is the density of trees and, to some extent, the maturity of the trees. "The oak savanna portion had some trees that were not logged, which may be 100 years old," said Gregg Pattison, a grassland wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Tom says the woodland area was clear-cut about 30 years ago, but became overcrowded and in need of thinning. Knowing this, he and Julita attended an Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) meeting to learn more about ways to improve the condition of their woodlands and to restore their new oak savanna.

The Iowa DNR directed the Pollards to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Osceola. NRCS District Conservationist Dennis Schrodt consulted with the couple about financial assistance through USDA to help implement a forest stewardship program. In 2011, the Pollards signed a five-year WHIP contract to restore

Julita and Tom Pollard recently completed a basal area thinning restoration of about 90 acres of woodlands in Clarke County.

nearly 80 woodland acres. The Southern Iowa Oak Savanna Alliance, through a grant from USFWS, helped fund the oak savanna restoration and prescribed burn.

Partnership Planning Effort

The couple met with Iowa DNR District Forester Randy Goerndt to create a forest stewardship plan that called for a basal, or area-wide tree thinning. The forest plan goals included: sustaining timber production, facilitating regeneration, and improving the understory for aesthetics and wildlife habitat – all with minimal disturbance.

For the 10-acre oak savanna, Pattison says the goal was to open the canopy and allow sunlight back to the woodland floor to enhance native herbaceous vegetation. "The other real difference between the oak savanna and woodlands is fire," he said. "The oak savanna portion will be burned frequently to enhance

this herbaceous growth and reduce woody plant invasion on the site."

Implementing the Plan

Tom Pollard said the forest stewardship plan called for selectively clearing trees. "Trees were fighting themselves. When you clear smaller trees out, it allows the better trees to grow," he said. "We looked for trees with straight trunks, nine feet or taller, and cleared shorter trees within eight or nine feet around them."

A scenic ravine runs through the Pollards woodlands where light can now shine through.

The DNR plan strategically split the land into smaller areas of 7 to 28 acres. The goal was to thin out selected trees. In the Pollard's case, thinning meant cutting the trees down with a chainsaw as close to the ground and as safe as possible. "We thought we could do it ourselves," said Tom. "We took a training course and bought chainsaws, but it was too much work." The Pollards hired professionals from the Iowa Natural Resources Corporation to finish the project.

Originally, the Pollards planned to thin out one or two areas per year, but Tom said, "It looked so good with such immediate improvement, we decided to finish the entire project in 2012."

Orange ribbons are placed on the best trees, and smaller ones will be cut around them.

Project Benefits

Goerndt cited four main benefits to the project:

1. Acorn and nut production for wildlife.
2. Faster tree growth and potential forest production.
3. Desirable natural tree production, such as oaks.
4. Wildlife cover in the woodland understory for nesting, fawning, loafing, and hiding.

Goerndt says research indicates forest thinning projects, such as the Pollard's, can result in tree diameter growth rates doubling, and mast production can be improved sevenfold within one cycle. "The thinning practice takes an overstocked forest and makes it a properly stocked forest, which improves the health and vigor of all remaining trees in the forest," he said.

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