

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Conservation programs provide tools for creating wildlife haven – hunter’s heaven

It’s hard to imagine an environment less hospitable for wildlife than the vast and rugged central highlands of Washington. With an average annual rainfall of less than nine inches, and temperatures that range from well-below zero to more than 100 degrees, nature’s creatures have to be superbly adapted to simply survive this harsh and unforgiving ecosystem.

But on the Stevens Ranch near Wilson Creek, the varied wildlife species that inhabit this broad expanse of rolling, sagebrush-covered hills are not only surviving – they’re thriving. Among other species, the ranch’s rangelands are home to a resident herd of 500 mule deer, and a migratory herd of another 1,000. And the 800 acres of restored wetlands host tens of thousands of migratory waterfowl annually.

It is a garden of – and for – life.

But this garden did not grow on its own – wouldn’t exist in its full splendor – were it not for the expertise and commitment of those who have created and who now care for this unique oasis of life. A group of four business

and family partners, passionately dedicated to improving wildlife habitat on their farms, are the quiet caretakers behind this remarkable habitat development endeavor.

The consortium of partners consists of David



With the help of the NRCS, Stevens Ranch partners (from left) Tom Pfeifer, Don Schmauder, David Stevens and Derek Stevens have created or enhanced hundreds of acres of wildlife habitat.

Stevens, Tom Pfeifer, Don Schmauder and Derek Stevens who farm various parts of a land mass covering some 40,000 acres.

Center pivot-irrigated alfalfa, timothy, green peas, wheat and potatoes make up the traditional production agricultural side of their operations. But it is the production of wildlife – and the resulting hunting opportunities – that truly motivates these partners.

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David Stevens,
Stevens Ranch

In their quest for better wildlife habitat, they found an additional partner – USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service – to help them turn their dreams into reality. “Here’s something you need to know,” David Stevens, the group’s senior partner, says as he leans out the window of his white pickup. “NRCS is the agency that provides the most benefit to wildlife on private lands. Their program money goes to the farmers who can see the project through to completion,” he says.

He should know. On the Stevens Ranch, there are some 800 acres of wetlands enrolled in NRCS’ Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – a program that serves to protect and enhance these critical wildlife areas. “There are other wildlife programs,” Mr. Stevens says, “but unlike the NRCS programs, they don’t work well



Stream stabilization work has enabled the seasonal waters from Crab Creek to meander in a more natural fashion. (Photo by Lisa Wareham)

on private lands. Many people don’t understand that if you’re going to have an impact on wildlife,” he says, “it’s got to be with private landowners.”

In addition to the WRP, the ranch also utilizes NRCS’ Wildlife

Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) cost-share funding – helping to install numerous solar-powered water pumps for wildlife water. Also installed under WHIP and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are “ungulate guzzlers,”

which are 1800 gallon, self-sustaining watering facilities. In addition, the program has provided cost-share funding to help establish “spring developments” – small reservoirs of water created from naturally occurring springs throughout the ranch.

Through EQIP, the partners have planted dozens of acres of food plots – grain and forage specifically grown to provide feed for a wide variety of wildlife.

Wildlife’s response to most of these enhancements has been immediate and robust. “Where they weren’t before, they are now,” Mr. Stevens says. “It’s too early to see the full effect of the wetlands enhancements,” he says, “but the other

projects are clearly helping the wildlife today.”

Ernie Holt, a soil conservationist with NRCS, says the partners have planted more than grass and grains as a part of their project. They’ve planted ideas. “We’ve used this area as a seed project – as a showcase for what can be done,” he says. “After seeing some of the various projects, other farmers – and even the U.S. Forest Service – have adopted the techniques that they’ve seen on this ranch,” he says.

Because of what his agency has done on the Stevens Ranch, other ranchers have an increased awareness and interest in the programs NRCS offers. “There’s no doubt we’ve received more program applications as a result of what we’ve done out here,” Mr. Holt says. “All of



Above, one of four excavated ponds provides critical habitat for many species of wildlife on the Ranch. (Photo by Lisa Wareham)

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High atop a rocky outlook, David Stevens looks out over a meandering Crab Creek and a 400-acre Wetlands Reserve Project. (Photo by Lisa Wareham)

this work has had a positive effect on landowner perceptions – about what can be done on the land,” he says.

Stevens, current vice chairman and past president of the National Mule Deer Foundation, and former Upper Grant Conservation District Wildlife Farmer of the Year, clearly enjoys seeing greater numbers of deer grazing throughout the ranch. “My goal,” he says, “is to have a deer every foot.” Then adds with a boyish grin, “I’m kidding – kind of.”



Planted specifically for wildlife, a dark green plot of wheat (foreground) will provide food for a variety of species throughout the year.

but Mr. Stevens and his partners do whatever they have to do to make the best management decisions for the wildlife – even if it means doing things that are not cost-shared through the programs.

“It’s hard to develop wildlife habitat in this part of the country, so you do what you have to do to make it work,” he says. “Our goal is to have a good balance for wildlife, but it’s hard.”

Despite the challenges, Mr. Stevens says

“If every landowner just planted a food plot... we’d have so much wildlife we’d be tripping over it.”

David Stevens,
Stevens Ranch

But Mr. Steven’s love of wildlife doesn’t end with deer. “I’m for all walks of wildlife,” he says, “whatever they are.” Love of wildlife and habitat conservation is a family affair. Steven’s son-in-law and partner Don Schmauder, was also recognized as an Upper Grant Conservation District Wildlife Farmer of the Year, and his son Derek, is a member of the Upper Grant Conservation District.

that he’d like to see other organizations and landowners do more to help develop wildlife habitat. “If every landowner just planted a food plot,” he says, “we’d have so much wildlife in this state, you’d be tripping over it.”



NRCS cost-share funding helped establish spring developments – like the one shown above – throughout the ranch.

The partners of the Stevens Ranch, using the conservation programs of the NRCS, are certainly doing everything they can to contribute to that vision of Mr. Steven’s wildlife utopia.

The NRCS cost-share and easement programs help defray the cost of creating the habitat for the wildlife on the ranch,

Ron Nichols, NRCS Washington
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