

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Vision, dedication and conservation transform eyesore into wildlife utopia

Most people saw an eyesore. John Hamilton envisioned a sanctuary – a place where wildlife would flourish, fish would splash, and physically challenged or ill children would come to spend a peaceful weekend – a place where they could briefly shed the bonds of illness while sharing some quality time with their families.

Few could imagine how a 15-acre parcel of over-logged, ill-maintained, over-grazed land in Ferry County – that also had the remnants of an abandoned ore mill site with tons of rock piles everywhere – could ever be a sanctuary. Few could imagine how this blot upon the landscape could ever be transformed into a haven of peace.

Still, Mr. Hamilton could not walk away from his dream.

“I knew the guy who owned this property,” Mr. Hamilton says, “so I talked with my wife about buying the place. Unfortunately,” he says, “she thought I was nuts. I could envision its potential,” he says. “But I just couldn’t talk Cec into it.”

A couple of months later while visiting with the owner, Mr. Hamilton received an offer he couldn’t refuse. So he didn’t. He bought the



Once an area that grew only mounting piles of spoils from an ore mill, John Hamilton’s pond and wetland area now grows a variety of plants and wildlife.

property on the spot.

“I came home and told Cec I bought the place,” he says smiling, his voice still tinged with a hint of hesitation. Her reaction to the news? “She was not very happy,” Hamilton says. “You might say there was a little

“... it’s great to be able to let the kids come enjoy what they helped create.”

John Hamilton,
landowner

thunder and lightning in my life for a while thereafter.”

But over time, as the couple camped on the ground that they now called their own, Cec softened to the idea that the land held more promise than she initially imagined. With the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the couple was able to begin implementing a remarkable terrestrial transfiguration.

Patrice Beckwith, a resource conservationist with the NRCS in Republic, says that the Hamilton’s did not have an ideal situation with which to work when they began the project. “The property had been logged hard,” she says. “I’ll have to admit that it was difficult to imagine the land’s true potential.”

Construction on the project began in the winter of 2005. The WHIP project now consists of 15 acres total, including five acres of wetlands, with one acre of open water.



NRCS’ Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program provided \$20,000 in cost-share funding to help create this wildlife haven.

for waterfowl. The target species for the project included cavity nesting water fowl; great blue herons; amphibians and reptiles; and cavity nesting birds such as woodpeckers.

“The pond was designed specifically for wildlife, featuring irregular edges and varying water depths,” Ms. Beckwith says. “More than 6000 cubic yards of material were removed during the construction phase of the project,” she says.

While the project is on private land, the Hamilton’s have shared their piece of wildlife utopia with the local community. The family hosted a

community fishing derby as a fund raiser for the Curlew school music program. Local residents could fish and make voluntary donations to the school. In addition, this past year, the Hamilton’s hosted a fishing event for a den of local Cub Scouts. “The Cub Scouts have helped plant many of the trees and shrubs on the property,” Mr. Hamilton says. “So it’s great to be able to let the kids come enjoy what they helped create,” he says.

The generously stocked pond virtually assures the young anglers of landing a prized rainbow trout – punctuating the enjoyment.

But despite the project’s remarkable progress, Mr. Hamilton’s final vision of his land is not yet complete. “My

Crafted by hand and made from fallen timber, numerous bird houses offer nesting opportunities for a variety of bird species at the Hamilton’s WHIP project.



In all, some 500 native shrubs were planted at the site. Two acres were seeded with grasses. In addition, multiple nest boxes, four snags, one perch pole and one roosting pole were installed. An island in the midst of the half-acre pond was created to provide nesting habitat

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Patrice Beckwith,
Resource Conservationist,
NRCS

dream is to create a place, perhaps with a cabin and a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk, where physically challenged or ill children and their families can come to spend a day or two – getting away from it all,” he says. “When you have a sick child, it’s hard on everyone in the family. It’s hard emotionally, physically and financially,” Hamilton says.

The Hamilton’s know first hand. Twelve years ago, the couple lost their child, Haley, due to a prolonged illness, spending extended periods of time in the hospital as they cared for their daughter. “My wife and I talked about doing something like this even before we bought this place,” he says. “We thought it’d be nice to be able to create a place where ill children and their families can get away from the hospital and all of the stress and heartaches.”

Together with their 10-year-old son John, Jr., the Hamilton’s are well on their way to creating that special place.

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Resource conservationist Patrice Beckwith (right) and John Hamilton review the progress of the habitat activities laid out in the conservation plan, which was developed for the project..

opportunities throughout Washington,” Ms. Beckwith says. “NRCS provided the technical assistance and about \$20,000 cost-share funding, but it was the vision and dedication of the Hamilton’s that made all the difference.”

What had begun as a dream is remarkably closer to a reality thanks to that vision.

“The project turned out so well that the guy I bought the land from made me another offer,” Mr. Hamilton says. “So I jokingly told my wife that he said we should become business partners, subdivide the property, and sell the lots with a view of the pond.” he says.

But Cec would have nothing of it. “With laughter in her voice, she said, ‘If you do, I’ll divorce you,’” Mr. Hamilton says. “So needless to say, selling is certainly not an option.”

*Written by Ron Nichols, NRCS
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Youngsters from the nearby town of Republic are pictured here participating in a fund-raising fishing derby at the Hamilton WHIP project.