

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Wetlands bring improvements to land, family, wildlife and community

To view wildlife, most people have to turn on the television or open a magazine. But all the Willms family has to do is look out their window or step out their back door. On this particular day, Marvin Willms was enjoying a hot breakfast when he spotted a doe out of his window.

“We didn’t see deer around here years ago,” his wife Sally Willms says, “but we certainly have the last few years.”

The increase in wildlife has not happened by accident. Almost a decade ago, Mr. and Mrs. Willms and Marvin’s mother, Evelyn, teamed up with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to transform their “almost unfarmable land” into a wonderland for wildlife through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

Through the program, the Willms family put in nine pond-like oxbows and planted 5,600 trees and bushes, including willow, dogwood, aspen and snowberry. The 1996 contract has improved 22 acres of the Willms’ 280 acres of land.

Mrs. Willms says the program was a perfect fit for them, as well as for Marvin’s parents, who owned the farm at that time.

“The program’s financial incentives were

good for Marvin’s parents because they were about to retire,” Mrs. Willms says. And the Willms family wanted wetland



The Willms’ family (from left Sally, Evelyn and Marvin) say their Wetlands Reserve Project habitat improvements bring a variety of wildlife right to their back door.

improvement because of their love for wildlife.

“We’re wildlife people, anyway,” she says. In addition to purchasing easements on the property, WRP also provided cost-share funding for the wetland restoration activi-

ties. Mrs. Willms says the oxbows and the other wetland restoration improvements provide good nesting habitat for ducks and shelter for ducklings. The wetlands also provide good habitat and winter cover for other wildlife species.

Mr. Willms says this year he's seen at least 50-100 migratory birds, 20-30 pairs of nesting ducks, 3-4 pairs of geese, a pair of nesting herons, quail, pheasants and many deer on their property.

Mrs. Willms says she and her husband also like to keep track of the different species of ducks they see. "It seems like every year we get something new," Mr. Willms says.

What many may not know is that NRCS and the Willms family's efforts extend far beyond the Willms' farm, benefiting the entire community. Wetlands improve water quality, bring wildlife to the area, reduce soil erosion, and reduce flooding.

The Willms family has always had a knack for nourishing life. In addition to raising cattle and small grain on their farm, the Willms cultivate an expansive rock flower bed, and cultivate tomatoes in a greenhouse.

Without any cost-share assistance from the government, they've built their own pond in their backyard for even more wildlife, as well as for recreation. They call the pond "Lake Marvin" – named in honor of Mr. Willms. The pond has been a source of entertainment and amusement for the Willms' eight



California poppies bloom in profusion near "Lake Marvin" – a pond that the Willms' created for recreational purposes near their home.



Marvin Willms, left, and NRCS Soil Conservationist Steve Sprecher review the Willms' conservation plan near one of the WRP ponds on the farm.

grandkids and one great grandson.

"One fourth of July we had canoe races. It was funny," she says laughing. "There were a few tip-overs."

For the Willms, teaming up with the NRCS and its WRP program has helped create family memories, beautify their land, help with finances and bring wildlife to their land. As a result of their efforts, the Willms family will continue to have the best seats in the house for viewing their favorite show – "The Wonders of Wildlife."

*By Lisa Wareham, NRCS Earth Team Volunteer
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In addition to game birds, the Willms' have seen a dramatic increase in the diversity of other species, like this Flycatcher seen here, since making wildlife habitat improvements on their farm.



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