



Creating Tranquility in Nature

Restored Habitat Provides Oasis for Butterflies and Birds

Above: (L to R) Helen Leavenworth, NRCS Soil Conservationist, Eva and Tom Wedel, Oak Woods Foundation, and Matt Miller, Soil Conservation Technician, view an established monarch habitat prairie on the Wedel property.

Oak Woods Foundation, in Argyle, Wisconsin, is an awe-inspiring oasis of tranquility. Rolling prairies and forests provide habitat for fluttering monarchs and other butterflies feeding on milkweed and various wildflowers. Tom and Eva Wedel started the foundation to preserve the peaceful benefits of their land. The Wedels main goal for the property is to promote the welfare of endangered and threatened species of concern, both animal and plant, and to take care of them by providing habitat to flourish. “We want to provide an environment in which they can thrive, and we can benefit from the beauty too,” explained Eva.

The foundation has 400 acres of land. Tom and Eva kept their house and 50 acres to continue to live on the grounds and care for them. The beautiful landscape has 120 acres of prairie and 280 acres of forested and non-farmable land. Tom and Eva were looking for land in Southwest Wisconsin and found the property in 1972. It was previously a dairy farm where the barn had burned down. The Wedels had found the perfect location to purchase and revive the land. “All the tillable land was in corn and the rest was pasture and trees,” explained Tom. While the Wedels contemplated what they wanted to do with the land, they rented it to a neighboring farmer who cropped it conventionally and kept their cows and horses on the property.

Tom and Eva decided they wanted to revive the conventionally cropped and grazed land. “When we decided we needed to restore the cropped acres, we found out about the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and their Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); we wanted to sign up,” explained Tom. At the joint USDA Service Center, the Wedels were introduced through the FSA to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), learning about beneficial conservation practices and technical and

financial assistance available to landowners. With the help of both FSA and NRCS, the Wedels were ready to jump in and get started. The Wedels enrolled 120 acres into CRP. They also planted a monarch and pollinator mix on 45 acres that were previously in corn, to build the soil back up after years of conventional cropping and to increase pollinator habitat. Once their farmable acres were in CRP, they wanted to restore their forested and prairie acres. “In 2014, we visited the USDA Service Center to work with NRCS and we started collaborating,” added Eva.

The Wedels enrolled in the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program to develop a Forest Management Plan with the help of a Technical Service Provider (TSP). Once the plan was in place, they were ready to install planned practices to improve their forest. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), they did brush management, planted conservation cover, and did prescribed burning in many areas. “We have nine areas of the forest in the plan and we now have details set for each area and what we want to do to revive it,” explained Eva. “NRCS, through EQIP assistance, helped us clear all the woods of brush and make them more manageable and healthy,” added Tom.

The Forest Management Plan helps the Wedels prepare for the future with manageable goals. “We learned about the life span of the different species of trees like black oaks and burr oaks. Our TSP said something that resonated with me. At the end of their life span, trees will fall; you can either harvest it according to plan before it falls, or you can clean it up after it falls,” said Eva. “We have a lot of really old oaks and we realize we need to manage our forest properly,” added Tom. The Wedels also had a large sloping field covered with gooseberries and rose



Left: (L to R) Helen, with Eva and Tom, checking prairie species growth.



Right: A monarch rests in the Wedel prairie.

Below: A bee visits purple coneflowers blooming on the Wedel prairie acreage. Butterflies enjoy feeding on milkweed. A bee pollinates the blooming Wedel prairie.

bushes; they were determined to restore the area. “We needed to free up the trees in the area and we started work. We made burn piles and cleared the area. That is now part of our flourishing EQIP prairie,” explained Eva. “Much of the acreage was corn and cows and it has greatly changed; we didn’t set out to do anything vast at the start, and all these little goals, with the help of NRCS, are completed and are really pulling the land together for the better. NRCS helped us to be purposeful each step of the way,” added Tom.

The Wedels also had many acres of prairie they wanted to restore for monarch butterflies and other beneficial insects. They enrolled in EQIP to plant conservation cover and do prescribed burning of their prairie acreage. Tom and Eva planted 12 acres of a multi-species pollinator mix, four of those acres were to specially benefit monarch habitat. They also planted one acre of a multi-species wildflower mix. Tom explains, “We took what funding we had left and planted an acre of 12–14 different varieties of wildflowers for beneficial insects to have habitat; everyone enjoys all the wildflowers.” As the habitat establishes, more monarchs and beneficial insects are finding the benefits. “One of the species we love seeing thrive over the years and come back is orange milkweed for the monarchs,” added Eva.

“The Wedels love sharing their land and love of nature with their sons and three grandchildren,” added Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician. The Wedels recognize many species the restored areas are benefitting, not just monarchs. We see many different

butterfly species including Mourning Cloaks, Baltimore Checkerspots, Swallowtails, Yellows, Eastern Tailed Blues, Eyed Browns, Pearl Crescents; we love seeing all these species and the Henslow’s Sparrow too,” added Eva. “We have so many butterfly species out here and bird species too. We had a hobby birder out here for three days and he counted 73 different species,” said Tom. “

The farm gives the Wedels a purpose to work and enjoy the scenery at the same time. “It’s quiet and we love being outside. We both love the outdoors and we both enjoy the work. We see that it makes a difference for people, wildlife and beneficial insects,” explained Eva. “These landowners are very conservation-minded and really take caring for the land to the next level. They’ve made efforts to work on and restore every acre they own. They even cleared their local creek of trees to benefit grassland bird species,” added Miller.

The Wedels took conservation to the next level by enrolling over 240 acres in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program. Through CSP, they planted multi-species monarch and pollinator habitat mixes that will be thriving in a few years. “The thing about NRCS is, it’s a working relationship but they are really our friends too. They genuinely want us to succeed and are there for us offering assistance; everyone in the office that we have worked with; it’s just been lovely,” explained Eva. “We have many goals for the acreage and our love and passion for the land keeps us working on it.”



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