

Price County Success from the Field

Winter is for Tag Alder Shearing

Working with farmers and landowners who are passionate about their land is a highlight of many Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees' careers. This is true for Price and Taylor counties with landowners like Todd and Veronica Berg from Minocqua, Wisconsin.

Todd and Veronica have been conservationists since the beginning and have been able to expand their passion onto their own land with the help of the NRCS and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). These nature enthusiasts were the first private landowners to take part in Wisconsin's Young Forest Initiative, a partnership with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and other agencies to assist in early successional habitat development and management.

Through the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), the American Bird Conservancy, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and other key partners were able to leverage their funding with NRCS. It has resulted in a highly successful, dedicated program to increase early successional habitat to benefit the golden winged warbler and many other species.

Twenty-one counties in northern Wisconsin were eligible to partake in the program with the practice of tag alder shearing. Through the RCPP partnership, around 3,000 acres of habitat improvement were completed. The partnership with ABC brought the dwindling golden winged warbler population into focus. This was particularly important for Todd and Veronica, who wanted to actively manage their land to utilize it for food plots, hunting, bird watching and having their own piece of heaven.

The WDNR reached out to the Bergs, seeing they had an excess of mature tag alder on their property. When tag alder matures, it becomes less dense, more branchy and is not an ideal habitat or food source. Young alder with vertical structure is more herbaceous and produces ample catkins, the male part of the flower, a tasty treat for many species including deer, woodcock and specifically, the golden winged warbler.

"The golden winged warbler, who undertake an astonishing migration, have also suffered one of the steepest population declines of all the song birds," notes the American Bird Conservancy. Callie Bertsch, of the American Bird Conservancy, has been influential in spreading the word about creating a more ideal habitat for these top priority birds to help "bring



Progression of tag alder shearing. Photos courtesy of American Bird Conservancy staff.

back the birds." However, she also says that we are helping to bring back a diversity of bird species. On the sites that have gone through the tag alder shearing, she has found multiple woodcock mating rituals, which is really promising.

Even more promising is the speed at which this work can be accomplished. As soon as a couple days after the shearing, Todd and Veronica were able to witness deer, grouse, rabbits, (maybe a few to many), and even a fisher on their property. By shearing the tag alder in the winter, we can lessen the damage to the soil and because the alder can store their energy in their roots, they can regenerate very quickly in the spring. The diversity that is regenerated is beneficial to creating a healthy forest.

While Todd and Veronica have had all sorts of adventures with the Young Forest Program, including having to remove the shearing equipment from the river bank, they are gratified by how well it has worked on their property. They will be applying again next year for funding to continue to keep their forest healthy. Not only are they helping their property, but they have encouraged their neighboring landowners to take part in alder shearing. "This has been a true success story from the flora and fauna, and also the relationships that are created between government and private land, that's huge! It has been nothing but spectacular," explained Melissa Knipfel, NRCS district conservationist.

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