

Rusk County Success from the Field

Where Wildlife and Farming Mix

Background

Earl Wadewitz and Jane Sorenson have called Rusk County home since 2006. They relocated to the area because they “were done with hills” having farmed in Trempealeau County for much of their lives. They were not done with farming, however. After moving to Glen Flora, they built up a herd of Texas longhorns and managed around 400 acres of grassland, which they hayed and rotationally grazed. They are retired from farming now, but a consistent thread can be found across the years on their property, a keen interest in conservation and wildlife.

Highlights

Earl and Jane’s first engagement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) came quick on the heels of their relocation to Rusk County. A portion of their land was not conducive to farming, being too wet, so they hoped to find a good management option. After that initial meeting with NRCS, they began to pursue a Wetland Reserve Program easement to restore the lowlands and improve habitat. In 2008, that culminated in the creation of a 127-acre easement, to which they contributed 53 acres.

When combined with their well-managed grasslands in the adjacent uplands, wildlife thrived on their property. Jane recalled having to train their dog to leave her “chickens” alone. Jane stated, “Over the years, we have seen many different types of wildlife on the farm. We routinely have had the chickens (Sharp Tailed Grouse) at the bird feeders, and Blanding’s turtle nests in the gravel along the road.” Earl quickly added, “We have also seen otters and nesting egrets on the property as well.”

More recently, Earl and Jane have reengaged with NRCS to pursue management on other areas of their farm. Earl and Jane are utilizing the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to have the forested acres on the property inventoried via a Conservation Activity Plan. During those initial meetings, it was also noted that large portions of the woody cover was over-mature tag alder.



(Left to right) Jane Sorenson and Earl Wadewitz discuss the value of early successional forest habitat with NRCS Soil Conservationist Brad Selz.

The Wadewitz property is centered in a core breeding area for the golden-winged warbler, which thrives in early successional wetland habitat. Shearing large stands of mature alder creates ideal habitat for this species. Given this, NRCS staff engaged with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) to consider a project through the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program, ABC: Improving Forest Health for Wildlife Resources in MN, WI and MI. The special initiative is focused on enhancing and maintaining habitat for the golden-winged warbler. The project was approved and is planned to be completed in winter 2021.

Future Plans

The Wadewitz’s are looking forward to the future on their farm. NRCS District Conservationist Nick Besasie noted, “Conservation never stops. There is always something that can be improved and NRCS can assist with those conservation goals.” In addition to the plan development and the shearing project, Earl and Jane have an application to enroll more land in wetland easements, which would connect their easement to another and create a 250-acre habitat block.

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