



NRCS Helps Charlevoix Sheep Farm Grow its Flock

When a farm family expands the farming operation must too, if the next generation wants to be a part of it. When Isaac Matchett finished college and returned to his family's Charlevoix County farm 12 years ago, the family decided to expand their sheep grazing operation.



The Matchett family sheep farm in Charlevoix County has grown from 110 to 1,800 ewes as the next generation joined the operation. NRCS assistance for practices like permanent fencing has helped them manage.

Isaac, his younger brother Noah, and their father Tim now have one of the largest sheep grazing operations in the state

with 1,800 breeding ewes on about 300 acres of pasture. The Matchetts are a fourth-generation farm family. The family's livestock consisted of turkeys until the mid-1950s before they switched to sheep along with raising some corn and hay, said Isaac Matchett.

As the family added additional land and sheep, continuing to manage grazing animals with only portable ElectroNet® fencing became too labor intensive, said Matchett. Matchett worked with NRCS to develop a prescribed grazing plan that includes permanent fencing to improve efficiency and reduce overgrazing and negative environmental

impacts like soil erosion. The family installed about 18,000 feet of permanent fencing in 2019.

The Matchetts raise Polypay sheep, a maternal breed which are "bred, born and raised to be moms," Matchett explained. The ewes on average produce 1.8 lambs a year which are sold for meat as freezer lambs at about 6 to 9 months in age. Although the sheep are shorn for wool, it is not done to make a

profit but for the animals' comfort.

Prescribed grazing involves dividing pasture into smaller paddocks and moving livestock from one paddock to another at intervals to prevent over grazing. Moving the sheep between paddocks allows the pasture to recover more quickly and reduces negative environmental impacts. Paddocks on the Matchett farm are not divided into an evenly sized grid, instead they divided up by topography and soil type. Sheep are finicky grazers, said Matchett. They will graze the top of a hill and ignore lower

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State Conservationist's Message

Recently NRCS Chief Matt Lohr announced new mission and vision statements for the agency.

Our Mission: *We deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world.*

Our Vision: *A world of clean and abundant water, healthy soils, resilient landscapes and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.*

"Our mission and vision statements reflect the dedication and valuable services that our employees provide. They speak to the heart of what we do, who we serve, and where we are headed," Chief Lohr said.

While our mission is clear to our customers, communicating our mission to tax payers who are not involved in agriculture is critically important. Consumers are becoming more aware of how their food is produced and the impact it has on the environment. It is important for the public to know that NRCS not only assists farmers in producing food, but also helps them to protect the environment.

Today we can not only reduce the negative impacts of agriculture, we can also help farmers have a positive impact on our natural resources. Today we have the knowledge and resources to help farmers improve the quality of their soils, improve forest habitat for threatened species, improve

habitat for pollinators and other beneficial insects and improve water quality. As stewards of much of our country's privately-owned land, farmers and private forestowners play a huge role in protecting our natural resources. For this reason, NRCS has an important role in protecting our nation's natural resources and



State Conservationist
Garry Lee

protecting the sustainability of future food, fiber and forest production.

~

I recently received a great honor from the Shiawassee Conservation District who selected me in my role as State Conservationist as their Conservation Partner of the Year.

One reason for receiving the award was NRCS-Michigan's response to last year's wet spring that prevented many fields from being planted. NRCS-Michigan was able to provide funding so that farmers could establish cover crops on unplanted fields.

Shiawassee County had the third largest number of contracts funded through the cover crop disaster initiative and the second highest amount of financial assistance provided. The excellent working partnership between NRCS and the district greatly benefited the county's farmers and the environment.



Top: NRCS Chief Lohr announced a new mission and vision statement for the agency. Above: The Shiawassee Conservation District presented me with its Conservation Partner of the Year award during its annual meeting on Feb. 20.

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spots with the same forage. For this reason, they still use portable fencing to subdivide paddocks when necessary. “You get a feel for it, if I know there’s a section they avoid I’ll target graze them to that area first.” Groups of sheep are moved between paddocks about every three days.

One might think that 1,800 ewes and 4,000 lambs would provide all the fertilizer needed to keep their pastures fertile, “not even close,” said Matchett. He completed a comprehensive nutrient management plan through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives program and conducts regular soil testing. Nitrogen is the most needed supplement along with some potassium and phosphorus, Matchett said.

Isaac’s father Tim first started working with NRCS for conservation improvements on the farm, said NRCS District Conservationist William Borgeld. The first practice he implemented was the EQIP heavy use area protection practice for highly erodible areas of his pastures. He also enrolled the farm in the Conservation Security Program, the predecessor to the Conservation Stewardship Program. Other practices the Matchetts have implemented include fencing to keep livestock out of a stream, roof runoff management, and protection for trail areas frequently used by livestock. Currently, they are looking into installing water facilities, waterlines and an animal mortality facility through EQIP.

Expanding from 110 to 1,800 ewes over the past 12 years has allowed Tim Matchett and his two sons to make a living from farming. By utilizing conservation practices to protect their land, future generations of the family will have the same opportunity.

Top right: Isaac Matchett, along with his father and brother operate an 1,800-ewe sheep farm in Charlevoix County. Middle Right: NRCS provided financial assistance through EQIP for permanent fencing included in the operations prescribed grazing plan. Bottom Right: The family shepherd has a custom seat on the back of the farm’s ATV.



NRCS Updates Soils Data for Portions of Antrim County

-Grand Rapids and Flint, Michigan, MLRA Soil Survey Office

Project Summary

This project was designed to address deficiencies in the Soil Survey of Antrim County. Conservation planners and other users identified a need for soil map units and slope classes that better fit current needs. The soil map units in the previously published soil survey were too broadly defined and did not allow for useful interpretation results. Soil survey interpretations predict soil behavior for specified soil uses and under specified soil management practices. Slope gradient affects conservation planning and a wide variety of soil survey interpretations used for managing cropland, forestland, and recreational development.

Key Outcomes

- Improved map unit concepts, soil component data, and soil line placement for over 311,000 acres in portions of Antrim County, Michigan, east of Torch Lake.
- Improved spatial data by using current digital elevation models to more accurately delineate soil map units.

Farmers, foresters, and land use planners can use the updated spatial and tabular data to make more informed decisions about a wide range of land management concerns. Conservation planners can use the improved data to better help farmers identify areas with a high potential of erosion and work to implement appropriate practices to reduce this risk. Soil survey staff will continue to work with local field staff, partner agencies, and the public to create similar improvements to soil survey data in other areas. This data will address current land use concerns.



Approximately 311,000 acres in portions of Antrim County were updated. Red represents the updated area.

The updated Antrim County soils data is available online through the [NRCS Web Soil Survey](#).

Aquaculture Ponds Help Tribes Preserve their Fishing Traditions

Supplementing walleye populations in area lakes helps Michigan's American Indian communities keep their fishing heritage alive. NRCS provides financial assistance to tribes for building aquaculture ponds, that are used to raise walleye

fry to a viable size before stocking. NRCS-Michigan has assisted four federally-recognized tribes to build these facilities. The most recent of these belongs to the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians.



Aquaculture pond used by the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians to grow walleye fry prior to stocking.



Outlet structure where pond is drained and walleye fingerlings are collected for stocking in area lakes.

Protect Michigan's Diverse Bird Populations by Protecting Forests

by Bill Cook, Michigan State University Extension

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife watching in Michigan is estimated to be a \$2 billion-plus activity. Birding, alone, attracts about 2 million people. In the high altitude economic picture, these aren't huge numbers but they're significant in the natural resources world. Roughly half of all birds that occur in Michigan use at least one kind of forest. Habitat quality is not a straight-forward thing. Different habitats serve different functions, and at different times.

Take the Ruffed Grouse, for example. It likes thick "brushy" conditions to nest and raise young. In winter, mature aspen and the male flowers are preferred food. Young sapling stands offer critical escape cover from predators. The males like to have large logs from which they "drum" to attract mates and establish territory. So, in a landscape of a few acres, a diversity of forest characteristics are needed for optimum habitat.

What makes "good" bird habitat? It depends. Let's start with a large parking lot. Not good habitat? Well, it's great habitat if you're a Ring-billed Gull looking for discarded and spilled food. It's also a pretty safe haven to congregate during migration as potential predators can be spotted long before they can reach the gulls. Now, if Ring-billed Gulls and their allies were the only thing that mattered, biologists might advocate for more paved parking lots.

There are about 150 bird species that use Lake States forests, not to mention the other vertebrate taxa and the mind-boggling numbers of invertebrates. Every species has a unique set of habitat requirements. It can be quite complex and, therefore, a bit challenging to answer the "best habitat" question.

The better question is; "Which birds do you wish to manage for?" A forest owner makes choices, either intentionally or by default. Forest conditions tend to run along gradients such as age, size, density, and composition. Proximity to different habitats is important. There's also upland/lowland and deciduous/conifer. To make assessments more

interesting, all these things change with time. Then, many bird species change their preferences with the season.

What can forest owners do?

- Learn what sort of forests you have from a "bird's-eye" view. Assess conditions from a larger landscape perspective. Consider managing for something different from the prevailing set of forest conditions.
- Encourage understory growth of shrubs and tree saplings. Think of a "green wall" in the summer time. This can be nearly impossible in areas where deer numbers are high.
- Maintain or create large dead trees. Biologists call these assets "snags."
- Underplant conifer species in stands dominated by hardwoods (deciduous trees). You'll likely need to cage them from deer and rabbits.
- Plant woody species that produce berries, nuts, and similar fruits. This food source is called "mast."
- Large logs on the ground are valuable habitat components.
- Protecting those spring season puddles (vernal pools) is important.
- Build and/or maintain corridors between different habitats. These are ribbons of vegetation types where birds (and other animals) like to travel from one place to another.
- Create young forests, which are declining across the Lake States along with many of the bird species that use them regularly. Be warned, this involves clearcutting.
- If you have several acres of "scrubland", a mix of grasses and shrubs, then you're really fortunate! Consider prescribed fire to maintain these conditions.

While each bird species has different requirements, suites of species can be aggregated into groups. One



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Hike with a Naturalist

For those wanting to learn more about nature, the Cass County Conservation District is offering “hikes with a naturalist” the first two Tuesdays of each month from March through October.



The hikes will take place between 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. at Dr. T.K. Lawless Park in Vandalia on first Tuesdays, and at Fred Russ Forest in Decatur on second Tuesdays.

Naturalists from the conservation district, Michigan Department of Natural Resources and other organizations will lead hikes focusing on a variety of subjects in the natural world. Some planned hike themes include; Birds, Blooms & Bugs, Let’s Talk Dirt, Terrific Turtles and Creating Natural Dyes. Hike attendees can also volunteer to do needed work in the parks such as trail clearing and removing invasive species.

The hikes will be held rain or shine unless a weather warning is issued. Attendees are responsible for park entree fees which are \$2/vehicle or \$15 for an annual pass.

For more information about the hikes contact Korie Blyveis at the Cass Conservation District at 269/445-8641.

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Forests for the Birds

suite of birds will prefer young forests. Another suite is more readily found in forests of old trees. Other suites will occupy lowland forests, upland forests, and so on.

The names for most of these birds are unknown to most forestowners. (Incidentally, common names have been standardized and should be capitalized.) Regardless, identifying bird species and learning their habitat preferences can be an addictive past-time and a great way to teach forest and wildlife appreciation to kids. Ultimately, actively managing forests with birds in mind *is highly rewarding*.

This article was published by Michigan State University Extension. For more information visit www.msue.msu.edu.

NRCS Co-Hosts NMSFC Workshop

NRCS and conservation district staff co-hosted a forestry workshop at the Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference in January.

NRCS District Conservationist Scott Hughey and Nia Becker, district forester for the Clare and Gladwin conservation districts, co-presented the workshop titled “Managing Small Woodlots for Wildlife and Profit.” This is the second consecutive year NRCS has presented a workshop at the annual event held in Acme.



District Conservationist Scott Hughey presents at an NRCS co-hosted workshop at the Northern Michigan Small Farms Conference.

NRCS Area 2 staff also hosted a booth at the conference’s trade show where attendees could get more information about USDA conservation programs.



Conservation District Spring Plant Sales

It’s that time of year when many conservation districts are taking orders for their spring tree and plant sales.

District plant sales are an excellent opportunity to purchase a wide variety of trees, shrubs and native flowers and grasses while supporting your local conservation district.

Many districts offer online catalogs and ordering. To find out more visit your local district’s [website](#).



Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

March

- 4 Michigan SWCS Seminar - A Matter of Balance: Conservation Agriculture in Uncertain Times, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Agro-Liquid Conference Facility - St. Johns, for more information go to www.migslwcs.org/events-and-archives
- 7 Grand Rapids Smart Gardening Conference, 8:50 a.m. to 4:15 p.m., DeVos Place - Grand Rapids, for more information go to canr.msu.edu/events
- 11 Spring Planting Workshop, 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Almira Township Hall - Lake Ann, for more information contact the Leelanau Conservation District at 231/256-9783
- 11 Agriculture for Tomorrow Conference, 9:15 a.m. to 4 p.m., Joseph Heirman University Center - Escanaba, for more information go to canr.msu.edu/events
- 18 Spring Planting Workshop, 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Leelanau County Government Center - Suttons Bay, for more information contact the Leelanau Conservation District at 231/256-9783
- 18 Woodlot & Forest Management, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Drake Farmstead - Kalamazoo, for more information and to register go to kalamazooconservation.org
- 19 Food & Forages, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Pickford Township Hall - Pickford, for more information go to www.clmcd.org
- 20 Farming for the Future in Antrim County, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Banks Township Hall - Ellsworth, for more information go to antrimcd.com
- 21 Fruit Tree and Permaculture Workshop, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Schrier Park - Portage, for more information go to kalamazooconservation.org

April

- 4 Mid-Michigan Farm & Garden Show, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Gladwin Community Arena - Gladwin, for more information go to farmandgardenshow.com
- 4 Tree Planting, Care and Maintenance Workshop, 9 a.m. to noon, Drake Farmstead - Kalamazoo, for more information go to kalamazooconservation.org

April ctd.

- 9 Agricultural Water Workshop, 9:15 a.m. to noon, Farr Center - Onekama, for more information and to register contact the Manistee Conservation District at 231/889-9666 or email michelle.jacokes@macd.org
- 25 Leelanau County Day of Planting, 9 a.m. to noon, Veronica Valley Park - Lake Leelanau, for more information contact the Leelanau Conservation District at 231/256-9783

May

- 9 Electronic Waste Collection, 8 a.m. to noon, Isabella County Fairgrounds - Mt. Pleasant, for more information contact the Isabella Conservation District at 989/772-9152
- 15 Environmental Education Day, Chipp-A-Waters Park - Mt. Pleasant, for more information contact the Isabella Conservation District at 989/772-9152
- 16 Mushroom Workshop, 10 a.m. to noon, Northwinds Forestry - Pickford, for more information go to www.clmcd.org
- 16 Household Hazardous Waste & Tire Collection, 8 a.m. to noon, Isabella County Fairgrounds - Mt. Pleasant, for more information contact the Isabella Conservation District at 989/772-9152
- 30 Private Land Aspen Management Workshop. 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., Sherman Township Hall - Gladwin, for more information contact the Clare Conservation District at 989/539-6401



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