An expanded acknowledgment effort marks the 20th anniversary of the Acres for Wildlife program.

Landowner Recognition Program

Story By Kathy Andrews

In 1985, the Illinois General Assembly challenged the Wildlife Habitat Commission to identify the most pressing policy issues facing Illinois.

A key finding was the role of the private landowner in the preservation of wildlife habitat. Controlling approximately 95 percent of the 55,645-square miles of Illinois, the private landowner was then, and remains today, the backbone of conservation of Illinois' soils, waters and habitats.

In response to the report, funding was allocated and the Acres for Wildlife Program expanded. The premise of that program remains the same today, but 20 years of knowledge, and the addition of new state and federal programs, have greatly expanded the opportunities available to landowners.

After a Department of Natural Resources district wildlife biologist receives a call from a landowner interested in the program, a site visit is scheduled to discuss wildlife goals and assess habitat management potential. Back in the office, the biologist writes up a plan that includes technical information related to the desired habitat projects and opportunities available for financial and equipment assistance.

"While DNR biologists are often the primary contact an interested landowner has, after assessing their particular needs we are able to quickly draw upon the expertise and programs offered by a variety of local, state and federal pro-

District Wildlife Biologist Doug Dufford commends Harlan Tipton for his work to restore habitat on his Winnebago County property.

grams, as well as programs offered by other habitat organizations," explained Mike McCulley, Field Management section head for the Division of Wildlife Resources. "Through this partnership effort we can create opportunities to maximize benefits to the land and wildlife."

An integral part of the program is acknowledging the initiative of the landowner.

"For the 2006 program we have revamped the landowner recognition effort, providing greater opportunities to recognize the dedication of five richly deserving landowners each year," said Kevin Woods, one of the DNR biologists spearheading the recognition program revitalization effort. "The contributions to wildlife habitat from the private sector—regardless of geographic location, habitat management practice employed, landscape scale or targeted species—is enormous. Recognizing their time and dedication is a small token of our appreciation for all they are doing for Illinois."

Harlan and Anne Tipton

Growing up, Harlan Tipton spent considerable time hunting, trapping and fishing along the Pecatonica River in northern Illinois, and he grew to appreciate the bounty of natural treasures the region held.

That interest in nature continued into adulthood, but as a full-time farmer of marginal river bottom lands that were all too often at the mercy of the Pecatonica River, the notion (or perhaps desire) of putting aside land for wildlife seemed only a dream. Tipton's participation with the Winnebago County Soil and Water Conservation District gave him the opportunity learn of new state, federal and private programs. He quickly took advantage of available conservation programs, setting aside active farmland and activating his dream.

But Tipton was not content at just practicing conservation measures. He has become a strong advocate as well.

According to Brian Russart, Resource Conservationist for the Winnebago County SWCD: "Harlan's standing within the farming community makes his a strong voice for conservation, and thousands of acres have been enrolled in conservation programs as a result of his encouragement."

"Harlan and Anne Tipton have installed virtually every type of habitat enhancement practice available on their land," explained DNR Wildlife Biologist Doug Dufford. "Not only have they planted cool- and warm-season grasses, food plots, trees and shrubs, and created wetlands and restored habitats, they actively maintain these areas through prescribed fire, mowing and exotic species control measures."

Orrin and Pat Bangert

Since 1986, Orrin and Pat Bangert have created a mosaic of habitats on their land, and watched as the wave of habitat improvement projects spread across surrounding properties.

Situated only 1 mile from the highest glaciated land in the state, the Bangerts have dubbed their northeastern Illinois farm "Bluestem." Even at this elevation, wetlands and a sedge meadow exist, and a water-control structure installed into a small gully created an ephemeral wetland that has become the seasonal home for the state-threatened Blanding's turtle.

Along with his wife Pat, Orrin Bangert has led in the creation of a grassroots habitat co-op in northeastern Illinois.

Returning their Livingston County family farm to a circa-1830s landscape has been the goal of Marty and Kris Travis.

Extensive habitat plantings round out the family's conservation practices, including high-quality prairie grasses, 2,200 wildflower root plugs and a tree and shrub windbreak. Delaying mowing until after the nesting season means that birds flourish on the 20 acres set aside as a Christmas tree plantation.

The Bangerts are in the process of enrolling 25 of their 140 acres into a permanent conservation easement. These highest-quality habitat acres, which were never tilled, will be protected in perpetuity for future generations to enjoy.

"The take-home message for the Bangerts is how successful their efforts have been in the 20 years they've worked on improving habitat," Ray Eisbrener, DNR wildlife biologist said. "They are active in a grassroots habitat co-op with about 25 landowners in a two-section area. The entire area is privately owned, and yet the landscape appears as if the state or county own hundreds of acres in these sections. The Bangerts are instrumental in this co-op, helping other landowners with prescribed burns, prairie seed collection and plantings."

Marty and Kris Travis

In rural Livingston County, Marty and Kris Travis have made a commitment to make a living off the land settled by Marty's family in 1830, and to do so operating under the principle of diversified farming.

Much of their production harkens back to practices in place when the farm was settled 176 years ago. Heritage vegetables grow in the garden. Maple sap is harvested and boiled into syrup. Pawpaws, raspberries, wild cherries, ginseng, wild plum, wild grape, bittersweet and wild leeks are harvested from the woodland. Honey from bees working the vegetable gardens, orchard and prairie is collected and sold. Downed trees are turned into Shaker-style furniture, with post-production branches and waste heating the home and syrup boiler.

"The Travises have been working since the 1980s to restore and preserve the landscape and essence of an 1830s farm," said Darryl Coates, the DNR wildlife biologist nominating the family for the wildlife landowner recognition pro-

gram. “But their dedication to the land is much deeper. They are committed to helping youth develop an appreciation of local history, and in sharing their experiences with landowners and biologists so others may gain from their work.”

Management of the farm has involved a wide variety of wildlife activities, such as DNR-authorized wild turkey releases, seasonal bird counts, a mussel survey, and construction, installation and maintenance of wildlife nesting structures. Native grass restoration and agro-forestry and silviculture management practices have improved soil conditions and habitat for game and non-game species.

For the Travises, landowner responsibility goes beyond conservation of the land and wildlife to preservation of our rural heritage.

Paul and Cathy Mason

In the early 1960s, Paul and Cathy Mason bought their first Morgan County farm, 13 acres of very rough pasture, with a goal of someday acquiring 500 acres—big plans for two newlyweds without any money.

Over the years, the Masons added ground, buying rough land with poor timber and bad fertility. The grounds others didn’t want Paul and Cathy considered as “grounds with personality.”

To help achieve their goals, Paul held two jobs and Cathy worked to pay bills and buy groceries. Their acreage slowly grew and they worked to heal the land. By the early 1980s they had saved enough to add his parents’s farm to their growing estate.

“In the late 1980s, the Masons enrolled some of the ground into the new Conservation Reserve Program,” explained Mike Chandler, local DNR district wildlife biologist. “Today, they have more than 100 acres in CRP and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The farm remains a work in progress, with ongoing work to convert some of the CRP land from cool-season grasses to warm-season grasses.”

Due to health problems, Paul retired earlier than expected and they fell just a few acres short of their 500-acre goal. With Cathy’s retirement, they now focus their time on caring for the farm.

“We try to take care of the land, and now in our retirement, it is helping to take care of us,” Paul said.

Paul and Cathy Mason have worked tirelessly since the 1960s to acquire and restore lands in Morgan County.

Showcased as a private land demonstration site in southeastern Illinois is the property owned by Jon and Leah Washburn, pictured with biologist Gary Potts.

Jon and Leah Washburn

Jon and Leah Washburn are proud of their accomplishments as stewards of the land, and it shows in the commitment they make to showcase their property as a DNR private land demonstration site.

In the early 1990s, the Washburns acquired a small tract of land for the site of their archery business. As business grew, so did the acreage and desire to develop the area for habitat and hunting purposes.

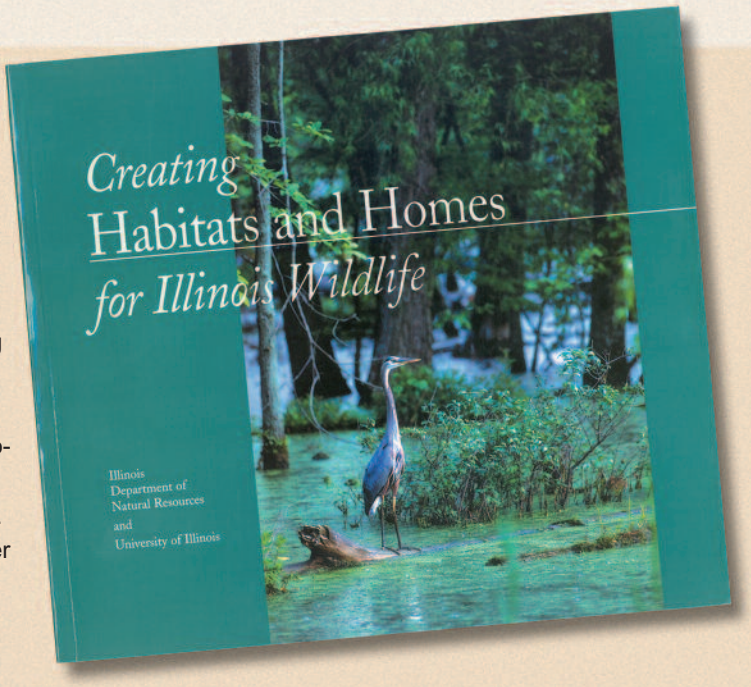
"The Washburns have shared their experiences with landowners by hosting a woodland management workshop and meetings of the local chapters of the National Wild Turkey Federation and Quail Unlimited," explained Gary Potts, DNR district wildlife manager based in Vandalia. "But, probably more importantly are the subtle messages of land stewardship and giving back to the community that are sent out each time they sponsor a DNR hunter safety education class or a NWTF Jakes or Women in the Outdoors event."

What the Washburns learned over time and by acquiring adjacent properties was the diversity of habitat types that a landowner can work on to positively influence wildlife habitat. On their first property, they focused on shrub and tree plantings, and on the second property they added a native prairie, a pond, food plots and shrub plantings. Efforts on the third tract included brush piles and fence row management, a large tree planting, a new fence row and food plot demonstration areas. Eventually, the Washburns completed their goal of working with all the habitat types: wetland, woodland, cropland and grassland.

Making a Difference

These five landowners were recognized for their efforts to improve the acreage they have been entrusted with, and have proven that whether on marginal floodplain lands, overgrazed pastures or virtually untouched soils, a little time and TLC can improve land for the benefit of wildlife, yourself and future residents.

Getting started

Landowners interested in participating in the Department's Acres for Wildlife program can find contact information for their district wildlife biologist at www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife resources/contacts.htm.

A great reference tool for landowners interested in enhancing the wildlife value of their property, "Creating Habitats and Homes for Illinois Wildlife" provides the background information needed to help you plan a project with confidence. Stunning photographs illustrate chapters on grasslands, prairies, woodlands, wetlands, croplands, backyards and more. Softback. 212 pages. $25. Available through the DNR Gift Shop (see inside back cover for contact information).