

Rock County

Volunteer Efforts Restore Habitat for Rare Species



Background

The Green-Rock Audubon Society, Inc. (GRAS) was incorporated in 1991 as a non-profit organization and operates as a local chapter of the National Audubon Society in Green and Rock counties, as the name implies. The mission of the Society is to restore, preserve, and protect the environment for everyone, including future generations through education, activism, and conservancy. In the early 2000s, they acquired 250 acres of land and a conservation easement, becoming a land trust. Not long after acquiring the land, they began making concerted efforts to restore the natural communities present at each of the publicly-accessible properties they manage (aka "GRASlands") which include: Androne Woods, Cleophas Reserve, Gabower-Reilly Reserve, and Spring Creek Reserve.

GRAS began working with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2004, soon after the land acquisition. Brush management was completed at Androne Woods and Spring Creek with technical and financial assistance through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Prescribed burning at Gabower-Reilly and Spring Creek were completed in subsequent NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program contracts.

Recent Efforts

In 2010, Victor Illichmann, Land Management Chairman and Volunteer Coordinator for GRAS, worked with NRCS staff through a Conservation Stewardship Program (CStWP) Nonindustrial Private Forestland (NIPF) contract to enhance the habitat at Androne Woods and Gabower-Reilly.

In 2013, they received an EQIP contract to develop a Forest Management Plan to identify further resource needs at Androne Woods. The Plan identified the need for herbaceous weed control, brush management, forest stand improvement, and tree/shrub establishment. The goal is to restore the oak woodland plant community at this site, which is a rare gem, as it is part of the original homestead never grazed by livestock.

A subsequent EQIP contract has provided financial assistance for the implementation of practices completed by a small, core group of volunteers working to bring back the native plant community. They concentrated on removing shade tolerant trees, battling garlic mustard and buckthorn, and underplanting oak saplings. In 2016, the progress is evident, according to Illichmann. "This spring we had 16 acres of wild geranium in bloom. The woodland anemone, joe-pye weed, and



Victor Illichmann, Land Manager for Green-Rock Audubon Society, at Androne Woods, one of several sites he is helping to restore.

"If you win a race, you get a medal. Out here, if you quit running, mother nature takes away the medal. She doesn't stop, so we can't quit." — Victor Illichmann

starry soloman's plume have spread throughout the woods. We have white hyssop spreading. In the last 2 years, we've had the tall meadow rue appearing. We have yellow lady slippers in 3 locations now. We have so much showy orchis that we lost count. Every year we discover something we didn't know we had. This year, it was columbine and poke milkweed," said Victor. The birds have benefited as well. Scarlet tanagers, indigo buntings, baltimore orioles, and others frequent Androne Woods. Victor emphasizes, "None of this work would get done without volunteers. It's all about the people volunteering to make it happen."

At Cleophas, an EQIP contract through the Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative is providing funds to complete prescribed burning, oak savanna restoration, and bluebird house installation on 36 acres.

Future Plans

The Society received a 2016 CStWP NIPF contract to further improve wildlife habitat at Androne Woods and is in the process of acquiring another 75 acres of cropland, woods, and CRP. "There's lots to do there to restore the land," says Victor.