

American Great Outdoors

There are many threats to our remaining prairie habitat in the Loess Hills region in western Iowa, among which is Red Cedar encroachment. This woody species lowers the available water table, and creates many seedlings that can eventually form dense colonies. In the absence of disturbance large groups of cedars form an overhead story creating a shaded environment that prairie plants cannot compete against.

The American Great Outdoors (AGO) grant through Partners for Fish and Wildlife Service that helps landowners with financial assistance to remove cedars and restore the remnants hidden below. In early May, two landowners in Pottawattamie County were approved for AGO funding and began restoring remnant prairies on their properties.



After a hot summer of cutting cedar trees on steep Loess terrain, both participants completed their projects. Pictures show both sites post-cutting. Fire will eliminate much of this slash this upcoming spring.

Using infrared imagery to identify areas with the most cedar encroachment, the landowners and I delineated proposed work areas. Field visits further verified many remnant prairie plants still persisted between the cedars, including many of the iconic grasses, but also many high coefficient of conservative forbs like Skeletonweed, Leadplant, and Compass plant.

The landowners worked through most of the summer to complete their projects, ultimately clearing a collective 23.5 acres of woody encroached grassland. Both landowners are looking to complete the restoration process this next spring by burning the cedar skeletons to release the prairie seedbank that lies below.

Thank you to all our partners!



Iowa Prairie Conference

Conservation professionals and prairie enthusiasts alike gathered at Iowa Western Community College (IWCC) in Council Bluffs for the 2017 Iowa Prairie Conference during the month of July. The conference included talks about implementing fire, prairie STRIPS, landscape-wide conservation strategies, seeding establishment and more.

Seminars were complemented by field trips showcasing high quality remnant sites, landowners who have chosen to enroll in permanent conservation easements, and an aggressive timber stand improvement project at an urban park in Council Bluffs.



Conference goers reach a hill summit at Folsom Point Preserve. The site that had once been mined for fill-dirt was purchased by The Nature Conservancy in 1999. Cedar removal, prescribed fire and many other conservation efforts have preserved and restored this remnant prairie

A personal highlight of the conference was identifying the first ever recorded Henslow's Sparrow, a state threatened species, at Folsom Point Preserve, a Nature Conservancy property located in the southern Loess Hills. This bird indicates that not only is the site currently high quality contiguous prairie, but symbolizes that through habitat restoration we have a chance to reverse the decline of grassland birds.

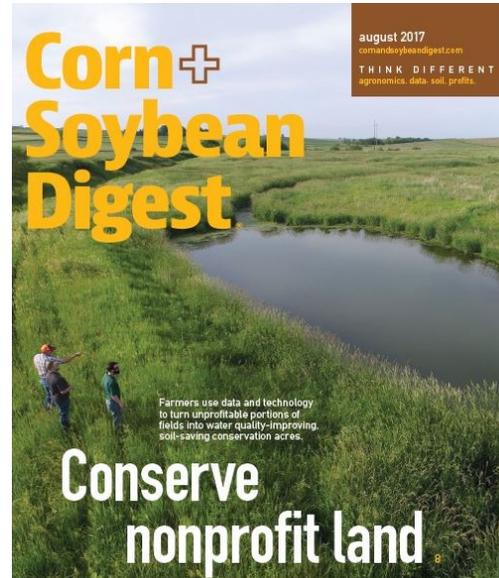
With so many passionate individuals gathered in one place, it was hard to not walk away with a feeling of hope for grassland conservation. Special thanks to all of the sponsors of this event, and especially Golden Hills RC&D for their role in organizing the conference.



Getting the Word Out

This quarter had lots of success with getting the word out about using precision ag technology to identify conservation opportunities. Nabbing the cover of Corn & Soybean Digest got the attention of lots of local producers throughout my coverage area.

Even more heads turned to look at how these emerging technologies can benefit Iowa when the Des Moines Register visited western Iowa for their story “How pheasant hunting can save rural Iowa, farming, and the environment” (link: <http://dmreg.co/2xmy8fX>). The article highlights the ability of precision ag to create great wildlife habitat and the success of the Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP) in Harrison County.



Training

In our role as conservation planners, it’s important that we make strides to understand local producers’ operations. A big part of those operations is the machinery (pun intended). At the ag equipment training I got a chance to see the latest equipment and ask questions to the dealer was incredibly informative. The training provided more knowledge about tillage operations and some options, like vertical tillage, that may offer less soil disturbance than their conventional counterparts.

In September, NRCS and partner staff attended a soil health training. Soils are the foundation for farming, and can be for resource conservation as well. Our knowledge of the biotic component of our soil continues to improve, and it’s now considered as perhaps the most important, rather than chemical or physical properties. Long-term no-till systems that incorporate cover crops are clearly our best attempt at mimicking natural systems within agricultural production. Working with farmers to implement these practices can benefit their bottom lines and promote healthy soils.

Getting a chance to see the rainfall simulator in action was an eye-opening experience. It helped me realize I need to start talking to every producer about no-till and cover crops. I can’t wait to get the simulator in front of more people.

Over 40% of interactions were in the Loess Hills

By the Numbers

Interaction Type	FY18 Qtr. 1
Landowner Contacts	129
Habitat Proposals	7
Projects with Acres	20
Outreach Efforts	6
Total	162

Loess Hills & Heritage Week

This year, by proclamation by Governor Reynolds, September 23rd through October 1st was the first ever Loess Hills & Heritage Week. The week offered many events that showcased the uniqueness of the Loess Hills region.

Joining the celebration I worked with partners to put on several different events to highlight the loess landscape, and the flora and fauna it holds.



Above
Discussing pollinators, butterfly gardens, butterfly ID, and conservation in a talk at Iowa Western Community College.
Photo: Jason Andersen

Left:
A small group explored TNC's Folsom Point Preserve in search of birds.
Photo: Lance Brisbois

Right: The Birding 101 class at Hitchcock Nature Center hit the trails to apply the bird ID skills we learned in the classroom.

