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Recent rains have filled the nooks and crannies of John Shephard's 60 acres northwest of Cedar Falls. The land has been seeded with prairie grass in hopes of creating a small wildlife refuge.

BRANDON
POLLOCK/
Courier staff
photographer



Back to nature

Man carves refuge for wildlife out of county cornfields

By CATHY CUMMINS
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On a chilly November day in 1984 John Shephard walked his newly bought 60 acres of cropland and thanked God.

"I said, 'This is mine. Thank you, God.'"

Shephard paused and looked across tall grasses rippling in a dawn breeze Wednesday. "It didn't take me long to realize it wasn't mine."

Eight years after he signed on the dotted line, prairie grasses have replaced cornfields. Fox dens dot a drainage ditch. Wild geese wheel overhead. Quail, pheasants and wild turkeys nest in the grass and 140 deer have been counted in the woods.

"I'm glad I did it," Shephard, 48, says with a satisfied smile. Pioneer farmers, who broke the prairie sod to cropland and drained millions of acres of wetlands, are probably rolling in their graves.

That doesn't bother Shephard, although he admits some farmers give him a hard time about his project northwest of Cedar Falls.

"I wanted to turn this 60 acres back to its natural form. I wanted to return something that had been taken," Shephard said.

The first thing he did was call in the experts.

Scientists from the Iowa State University Extension Service and the Soil Conser-

vation Service joined members of the Black Hawk County Conservation Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to lay out the plans and ditches.

Biologists from the University of Northern Iowa told him which wild grasses would support ducks, geese and other animals.

But Iowa's number one crop hasn't been banished completely from the plot. Every spring, Shephard revs up an old tractor he keeps on the plot and plants two patches of corn to provide food for the deer living in the woods.

Like seeding wild grasses, that too, was a learning experience for the equipment and supply manager for wholesale distributor Hawkeye Foods Systems Inc. in Iowa City.

"It's amazing what fertilizer will do," he said. "The first year I didn't put any on and the ears weren't any bigger than my thumb. The next year I added some and they were great."

Shephard estimated he has put about \$12,000 into his project, about two-thirds of that cost-shared with government conservancy programs. Part of the land is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, which will make sure commercial crops won't be grown on the land for 10 years.

He's also signed up 16 acres for the Wetlands Reserve Program, a pilot project funded by the federal government.

The project aims to buy 50,000 acres of wetlands in eight states — the sale would keep the land as a wetland permanently.

The permanent aspect appeals to Shephard, who wonders if his two boys will keep the wildlife refuge as is or start courting developers offering cash and subdivisions.

"I don't want it changed, but when I'm gone, my kids might want the almighty dollar," he said. "Hey, I might even want it later on in life."

But for now he counts himself lucky to have a quiet pool of wilderness to retreat to as needed.

"I'm lucky, no doubt about it. I don't have to make a living off this land," he said. "When I bought it I was thinking, could I really justify buying this and not doing anything with it?"

A few friends are free to hunt on the property, and neighboring landowners have added their acres of refuge.

But it doesn't take long for him to justify the purchase. Within two hours, he'll share his favorite memory of the refuge three or four times.

"We were out here hunting and the sun was just rising in the east, the sky turning ... and over there? over there was the moon, glowing and just a day shy of full, setting at the same time.

"I love the outdoors."