

Boeck's wetland project comes to life

Spring rains help eight-year effort finally pay off

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WATERLOO

Day by day, Bob Boeck's dream is coming to life.

Ducks and geese, flora and fauna and even a turtle have taken up residence on the 33-acre area Boeck has turned from cornfield to wetland over the last seven years.

Pheasants cackle from the nearby cover of prairie grass, which also provides a sizeable sanctuary for a doe and her fawns.

It's exactly the scene Boeck envisioned when he purchased the 80-acre property eight years ago.

"I call it my playground," says the Waterloo firefighter, who has created his own wildlife area during a time when such areas are more often being turned into cropland rather than away from it. "I come out here a lot."

The wetland area, enrolled in the government's Wetland Reserve Program, is the product of a partnership between Boeck, the Department of Natural Resources and several local conservation organizations.

It was completed in 1995, but until this spring lacked the necessary April rains to fully realize its potential.

"It kind of sat here for a couple of years where it would get saturation and the ducks would start using it, but then, no rain," explains Boeck. "This spring, we've had some real heavy rains."

"This thing filled completely. I actually had to discharge water. Now there are 19 acres of water here."

Boeck counted five species of ducks this spring, along with Canadian geese and numerous shore birds.

"I've also seen some yellow-headed blackbirds, which usually prefer a larger marsh," he notes. "That's the sign of a quality wetland if they will establish themselves on it."

Plant growth is also coming on strong.

"Because it's full of water, it's kind of in transition as far as the flora and fauna that are here," Boeck explains. "When it's completely full, it's actually killing out the weeds and promoting growth of the cattails and rushes and some of the more natural wetland plants."

As much as he is a lover of nature, Boeck is also a hunter. His passions include the pursuit of pheasants and deer.

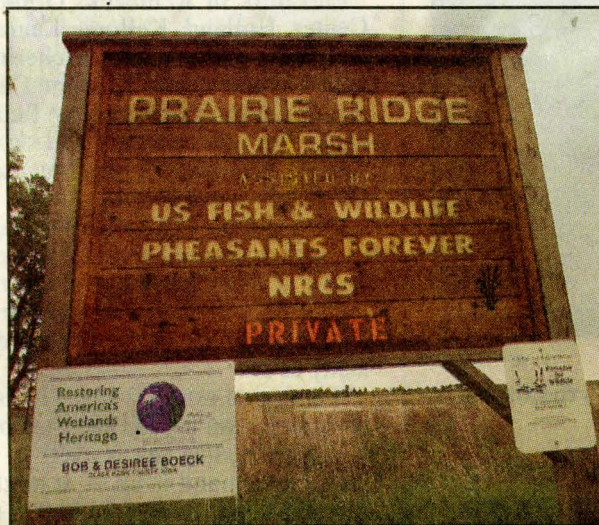
"I constantly monitor the number of birds (pheasants) I've got here," he says. "I let my friends do some hunting, but when I bought this in 1991 I established a rule that nobody, including myself, could take more than one bird."

"Because of limited hunting, I can



DAN NIERLING / Courier Staff Photographer

Local firefighter Bob Boeck has turned an 80-acre farm on the north edge of Waterloo into a wildlife area complete with a 33-acre wetland and a large stand of prairie grass. Above, he explains how a system of gates controls the water level on the marsh, which filled to capacity for the first time this spring. Below, the sign at left marks the entrance to the area and recognizes several of the groups that helped make the project become a reality not only for Boeck, but for creatures like the red-winged blackbird at right.



almost always have a friend come out and get in some good dog work. With the quality of habitat I've got here, this is probably a holding area for several sections. I feel an obligation to regulate the number of birds taken."

When Boeck purchased the property, he never envisioned adding a 33-acre wetland area.

"That was just an option that came along," he explains. "Because of the wetland program, I started asking, 'What if?' Had I learned early on that it wouldn't qualify, I would never have pursued it."

"You just kind of take it one step at a time and see if it will work. Any one step can knock you out of the running. This project just worked."

Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever and the Cedar Valley Wetlands Foundation are among those who

assisted, both financially and physically, with the various projects on the property, and Boeck enjoys sharing the final product.

"My phone number (266-4101) is on the sign at the edge of the property," he notes. "I do want a phone call. From an environmentally sensitive standpoint, I don't just carte blanche anybody who wants to come out."

"And, of course, I am a little more restrictive during the hunting season. Some people need a little monitoring."

"I've had some groups from UNI and Hawkeye Community College come out and that's been neat because we've been able to exchange information."

Boeck's wetland is one of just a few in Black Hawk County, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which provided technical advice for the project. Statewide,

some 50,000 acres have been voluntarily restored to wetlands.

Marshes like Boeck's hold back floodwater and improve water quality by acting as filters, in addition to their benefits to wildlife.

"When you work on a project like this, until you see it go, you really don't know," says Boeck. "It's like putting a roof on your house. Until it rains, you don't know if it's going to leak or not."

At one time, Boeck was prepared to return his CRP ground to cropland once the current contract expired. He no longer sees that happening.

"I can't envision that under the plow now," he says. "That would just break my heart. I would rather mortgage our house."

"This is basically going to stay as it is, and hopefully, we're going to enhance every aspect of it."