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Mix of short and tallgrass prairie increases species diversity at Heritage Hills in Clarke County



Remnant prairie is returning to hilltops on the southwest side of Heritage Hills Wildlife Area in Clarke County, re-emerging after cedars and hedges were removed and prescribed fire was used on the site. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Jones, Iowa DNR.

The Heritage Hills tract in Clarke County is not easy to find, but for anyone willing to put in the effort, the 595-acre public wildlife area offers views of an emerging remnant prairie, sounds of quail whistling on a picturesque southern Iowa landscape.

The remnant prairie is on a hilltop on the southwest side of the area, re-emerging after years of hiding beneath cedars and hedges. Walking up the hillside, wildlife biologist Heath Van Waus was pointing out the prairie plants - whorled milkweed, false boneset, black-eyed Susan, leadplant, Indian grass, partridge pea, little bluestem, big bluestem, gray headed coneflower, hoary vervain, stiff goldenrod and more.

“When we looked at this particular area we noticed remnant prairie species indicators in the few open areas. So we had a contractor come in and remove the larger trees and brush that were preventing sunlight from hitting the ground,” Van Waus said. “We followed up that work with fire this spring and the prairie came back nicely. The diversity; it looks like its been here for years. I haven’t seen remnant species come back like this quickly in a long time.”

This newer wildlife area was acquired in 2019-2020 as a partnership between the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the DNR’s wildlife staff have been working with local partners to get a lot of projects done.

Volunteers with Backcountry Hunters and Anglers have spent time removing fencing and cleaning up old farm equipment. Pheasants Forever has worked with staff on brush removal.

A local farmer works closely with staff to use intensive grazing targeting cool season grasses to benefit the more desirable forbs and warm season grasses. Cattle are fenced in specific areas and removed by June. The farmer also helps with prairie conversion by farming old hayfields to help prepare the seedbed before becoming additional native prairie, and by planting and managing the food plots.

“We’ll continue to tackle the young cedars and hedges with fire, restore the grasslands and add new prairie to the area,” Van Waus said. “We will have a diversity of grassland types here, we have both short and tallgrass prairie which increases the overall diversity of many species that call this WMA home.”

Clarke County is in southern Iowa’s quail range and DNR staff began annual quail surveys in 2019.

“There are quail out here,” he said. “We’ve heard pheasants too – so there is opportunity here to increase upland game bird numbers.”

The management plan includes emphasizing quail friendly habitat, like adding plum thickets where that native component is absent, and using small grains, like sunflowers, rye, winter wheat or triticale. Planting the ten plumb thickets was aided by a grant from Alliant Energy.

“The surveys are a good indicator that help show what we’re doing, is working,” Van Waus said. “We’ve gotten a lot done, but there’s still a lot to do.”

He said they will continue removing old fencing and exposing hilltops, looking for remnant prairie, and converting a portion of the area to upland habitat. Although it is located in southern Iowa, there is not a lot of timber on the site.

Heritage Hills Clarke County tract has a number of shallow ponds and a stream running through it, but not deep enough to support a fishery.

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