

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



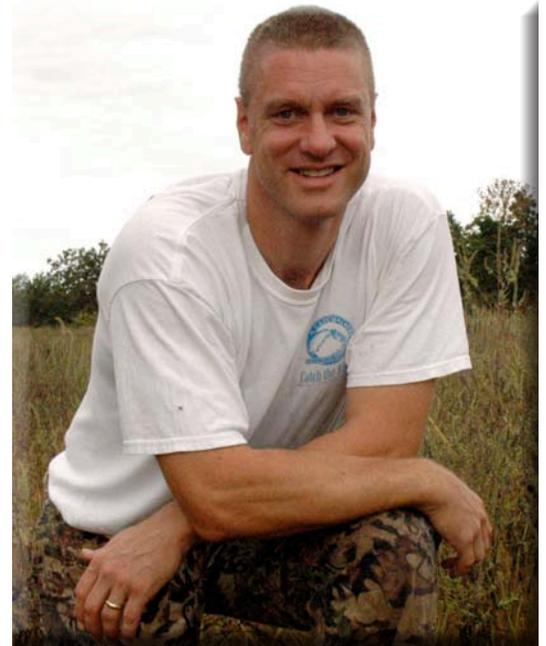
Monroe County Sportsman Targets Habitat Diversity

Outdoorsman Bill Winke believes a natural environment with diverse habitat is the key to attracting deer. That idea influenced his decision to direct-seed 120 bushels of acorns (red and white oaks) and walnuts by hand spreading them on 22 acres of his Monroe County farm in October 2007.

Winke says habitat diversity can provide deer everything they want at all times of the year. "Deer will spend five minutes in a soybean field and then they'll go to the edge and nip hedge leaves," he said. "It's the diversity that matters. If you have just cropland or just trees, you only have what deer want at certain times of the year."

Winke is a native of Allamakee County; he moved to Monroe County in 1995. He is a veteran freelance writer and photographer – more specifically for hunting strategy, primarily whitetail deer. In recent years he has also produced hunting videos for the internet. Winke is a farmer, too. He owns and operates several farms in Monroe County, where recreational hunting ground is becoming a hot commodity.

Winke purchased newly cleared marginal cropland surrounded by timber in the late 1990s. He farmed it for a few years, but he said it did not perform well in soybeans or hay. "I was tired of farming the



Winke is an accomplished freelance writer and photographer for many hunting magazines and internet sites. He has recently started an internet-based video business.

hills," he said. "The soil is poor and I was always fighting erosion. I put thousands of dollars of fertilizers into it and all I got was a couple of bales – it didn't work."

So to put his land to better use Winke decided to seed trees along the contour. He also left about five acres of level ground as open grass space and wildlife food plots to create a diverse environment for deer. To offset the cost of seeds and the seeding process, Winke sought assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). He received \$360 per acre through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), a voluntary program that provides financial assistance to private and public landowners to establish wildlife habitat.



Bill Prucha hand spreads acorns and walnuts across a field in October 2007. Winke chose direct nut seeding to create a more natural, diverse habitat environment.

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In addition to NRCS conservation programs, Winke utilized the local expertise of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) District Forester Duane Bedford (Chariton) for technical assistance on this direct seeding project.

An early frost hit southern Iowa in 2007, so no local acorns were available. Winke went north to the Cedar Rapids area to find the 500,000 acorns and black walnuts he needed. "There was a lot to learn about oaks, especially white oaks, on how to handle the seed to avoid drying out the roots," said Winke. The nuts were soaked and stored for 24 hours at 34 degrees; walnuts and red oaks do not germinate unless they are exposed to a period of moist cold. White oaks germinate soon after falling, sending down a tap root.

Winke prepared the site by spraying Round-Up® to the existing cropland. After two weeks, he tilled the area twice to a three-inch depth. Winke then randomly hand spread walnuts and acorns across the tilled ground. "Just as soon as we were done spreading acorns and walnuts, we disked it trying not to turn up any fresh dirt," he said. "Then our

distribution of seeds was from the top of the soil to the maximum depth."

The plan was to use a cultipacker to firm the soil around the seeds and to ensure seed-to-soil contact, but heavy rains quickly followed and prevented that operation. Winke said the seeding was still successful, though. "I think we really had a good opportunity for it to succeed," he said. "The seeds were in the ground a day or two and they were wet, and stayed wet. They've never dried out."

The entire process took Winke and his crew about five days. He said hand spreading the nuts was the only part of the process that he felt took a long time. "Without spending a lot of time and money researching other ways to apply the seeds, I knew it would work if I threw them out there and disked them in," he said.

Once seeded, a concern was depredation. Squirrels took some nuts off the top, but no wildlife disturbed buried acorns. Winke says this is an advantage of direct seeding over other methods. "The turkeys never went scratching for acorns, which was interesting for a year with no acorns," he said. With direct seeding "you can swamp the area with so many little trees at once that they can't eat them all. If you put them in rows, [wildlife] will just walk down the row and eat them all."

Another benefit Winke sees in direct seeding is drought hardiness. "I think you're way better off letting the seed establish their own root," he said. "The young trees will be better able to handle the stress from dry conditions."

Winke estimates acorns and walnuts were spread at a rate of 20,000 per acre, or about two per square foot. He thinks the survival rate will be 40-50 percent.

Monroe County District Conservationist John Frieden with NRCS says he respects the way Winke cares for the land. "He is turning



Bill Winke (left) identifies a red oak among the tall grasses with Monroe County District Conservationist John Frieden. Winke plans to spray the area for weeds this fall.

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it around and really managing it,” he said, “not only for wildlife but for future timber production.”

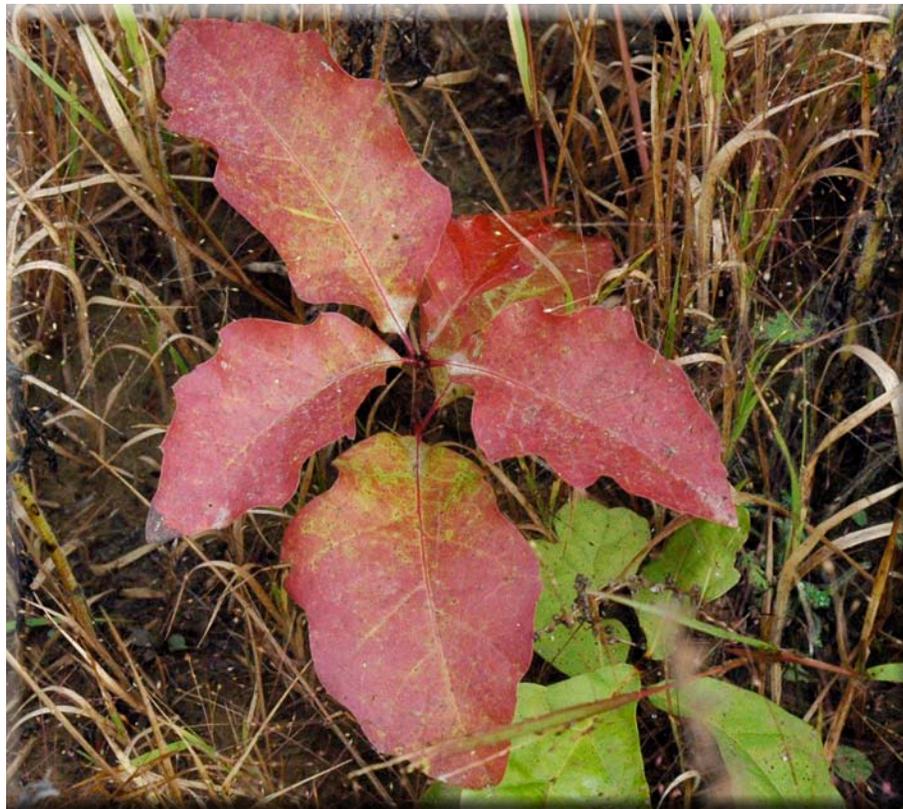
A year has passed since he direct-seeded the acorns and walnuts. Next up for Winke is weed control. He plans to spray for weeds with recommended chemicals when the trees are dormant this fall.

For information about conservation plans and programs, such as WHIP, to help reduce soil erosion, improve water quality or wildlife habitat on your farm, visit your local NRCS office or go online, www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov.

NRCS Programs Help Winke

Besides obtaining assistance for his 22-acre direct seeding project, Bill Winke has also utilized the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program on nearly 400 other acres to manage brush and improve his forest stands. In addition, Winke has received assistance through the NRCS-administered Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to apply other conservation practices to improve wildlife habitat on his land. “NRCS has the programs to help me optimize and maximize the resources on my farm,” he said.

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Red oak trees germinate and grow in the spring following a fall direct seeding. Here, a red oak one year after direct seeding.