

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Patience, Persistence Pay Off for Shephard

John Shephard admits he didn't know weeds from forbs in 1984, the year he purchased his very own piece of land, fulfilling a lifelong dream. Now, 23 years later, with guidance, a vision and a plan, this Black Hawk County landowner has his own 60-acre wildlife haven.

A former food industry worker who lives in Cedar Falls, the 63-year-old Shephard purchased the 60-acre property that he once hunted. About half was corn and beans, while the rest was trees, prairie remnants and pasture.

Shephard had no interest in using the property for cropland, or even as an investment. He was interested in enhancing the land and restoring it back to its original condition—native prairie grass, wetlands and trees—purely for enjoyment.

"I have always loved the outdoors," said Shephard. "This is a natural piece of land. It has a little bit of everything."

The land is tucked away in the northwest corner of Black Hawk County, in Union Township. The location is home to a sort of "prairie complex" of hundreds of contiguous natural acres, including one of the largest sand prairies in Iowa, Cedar Hills Sand Prairie, managed by The Nature Conservancy.

Shephard worked closely with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Black Hawk County Conservation Board to identify prairie remnants, and The Nature Conservancy assisted in plant identification.



*John Shephard takes a look at Indian Grass on his property, one of several species of native grass that grows there.*

In 1987, Shephard installed the first conservation practice—a buffer strip—to protect the area from pollutants. Buffer strips are strategically placed strips of vegetation that intercept unwanted sediment runoff, nutrients, pesticides and pathogens. They also enhance wildlife habitat and protect biodiversity. Shephard installed the buffer with assistance through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Through the years, Shephard has worked with many agencies and organizations, including the Tallgrass Prairie Center, located on the University of Northern Iowa campus. The Tallgrass Prairie Center, formerly known as the Native Roadside Vegetative Center, advocates the use of native vegetation to provide environmental, economic and aesthetic benefits for the public good. Individuals from the Center helped Shephard identify native plants and grasses on his land, and took him to the Cedar Hills Sand Prairie to identify plants he could harvest and plant on his property. Since Shephard's

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land sits so close to the Cedar Hills Sand Prairie, he sought permission from the Iowa DNR to collect seed to protect the integrity of the local ecotype on seven acres of his prairie.

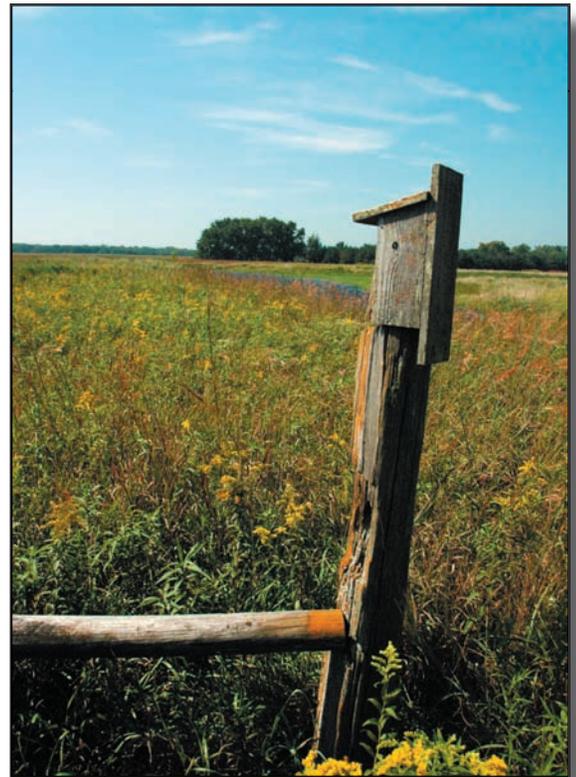
“John collected, sorted and then planted locally harvested native seeds on his property, and it’s looking good,” said Julie Falcon, soil conservationist in Black Hawk County. “All the work that he’s done on his own makes this a unique story. Most people don’t take the time to do that.”

In addition to harvesting and spreading native seeds, Shephard estimates he has planted 16,000 trees and shrubs since he purchased the property.

Shephard signed contracts in 2003 and 2005, through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), which is administered by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). WHIP is a voluntary program that provides financial assistance

to establish wildlife habitat. The program has allowed Shephard to enhance natural wetlands on his property, improve timber stands, plant and seed native grasses, and plant oak trees and conifers.

Shephard said he now attracts more water fowl, and has identified such birds as the American goldfinch, bluebirds, pileated woodpeckers and bobolinks. In addition, he says he now sees bald eagles, Blanding’s turtles and turkeys.



*Shephard has several birdhouses throughout his 60-acre property.*

Shephard says he lets a few hunters on the property, but he doesn’t hunt anymore. “I would rather walk around with a shovel than a shotgun,” he says.

Patience and persistence has allowed Shephard’s property to flourish. “You have to have a vision, and then stick with it,” he says. “It’s a lifelong learning process; go slow and seek advice.”

In addition to the Tallgrass Prairie Center, Iowa DNR, The Nature Conservancy, Black Hawk County Conservation Board and the USDA-NRCS, Shephard has worked with the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Pheasants Forever, National Wild Turkey Federation and the Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District.

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*By Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist  
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines  
September 2007*



*Heavy August rains allowed wetland areas to fill with water, attracting more water fowl.*

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