



## Preserving Woodland Dunes Habitat

### *Small Non-Profit Proves Huge Impact in Community*

*Above: (Left to right) Matt Rataczak, Jennifer Powell, Jim Knickelbine, and Travis Mead viewing restored habitat on Woodland Dunes land.*

*By Tivoli Gough, NRCS–Wisconsin Public Affairs Specialist*

Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve, located between Manitowoc and Two Rivers, Wisconsin, was founded in 1974 by local people who wanted to preserve forested wetlands for wildlife, especially songbirds. Residents formed a non-profit organization, purchasing the first parcel of land in 1975. The same year, they started providing environmental education programs for school children with the help of volunteers. Today, Woodland Dunes has acquired tracts of land totaling 1,315 acres. “Much can be done to manage land for the benefit of both wildlife and people in our communities, and the results can be dramatic and very positive if the effort is applied,” said Jim Knickelbine, Executive Director of Woodland Dunes.

Much of the preserve consists of old beach ridges or dunes and alternating swales, formed by previous shorelines of Lake Michigan. There are few places along the Great Lakes where these dune-swale formations still exist, and they offer very diverse habitat for wildlife. The preserve’s location near the shoreline of Lake Michigan is a stopover site for many species of birds during migration. In addition to the 263 species of birds that have been found at the preserve, more than 400 species of plants have been identified, 40 species of mammals, including black bear, river otter, and fisher, nine amphibians, and all seven of Wisconsin’s bats have been recorded. Visitors flock to Woodland Dunes to hike their picturesque trails, birdwatch, observe other wildlife, buy local products such as honey, and learn about conservation.

Year-around conservation education programs at the Center bring in more than 3,000 school children annually for educational programming. Many others visit the center for family and adult programs, events, and to use seven miles of

free public trails and other facilities. Woodland Dunes program opportunities include outdoor conservation, wildlife conservation, winter ecology, the nature of maple syrup, wetland education, and much more. “We feel that educating youth about the nature of which they are a part is critical to their becoming good stewards of our natural resources. Our impression is, many children are increasingly unfamiliar with nature and perhaps not as frequently exposed to natural areas, as were children in the past; there is a need to teach them to understand and appreciate the natural world,” said Knickelbine. “Having such a unique place to visit and explore close by, that caters to kids who’ve never taken walks through forests or natural areas, is so rewarding to see,” said Travis Mead, NRCS Soil Conservationist for Manitowoc County.

Although the preserve is an important natural area, it has been significantly impacted by human activity. In the past, farmers allowed cattle to graze in the forest, timber was harvested, land was used for agriculture, and erosion was evident. Invasive, non-native species are widespread in the preserve and need constant management. As a non-profit corporation with a small staff, managing the land for the good of both wildlife and the public is a constant challenge for Woodland Dunes. In 2006, the Center enrolled agricultural land in the Farm Service Agency’s Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and received technical assistance from NRCS. With the help of an NRCS biologist, they established a 49-acre tract of warm season native grassland. They have also enrolled 45 more acres for pollinator habitat in FY2016 through CRP. These successes resulted in a great partnership and working relationship with NRCS.

NRCS assisted Woodland Dunes in developing a conservation plan, enrolling 948 acres in the Conservation Stewardship

# Helping People Help the Land



Active hives on Woodland Dunes land.

Program (CSP) and 89 acres in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for FY2015. Through these programs and CRP, Woodland Dunes will plant 146 acres of approved pollinator seed mix, including wildflowers, to provide pollen and nectar in early, mid, and late growing seasons. The NRCS pollinator mix requires one, bunch grass species and nine forbs and/or legumes, three from each bloom period. "NRCS provided guidance for basic pollinator seed requirements; Woodland Dunes had the opportunity to choose additional seeds above and beyond the requirements to provide habitat for as many species as possible to conserve biodiversity," said Matt Rataczak, NRCS District Conservationist for Manitowoc County. From June to September, the Midwest region is the resting ground for over 65 percent of commercially managed honey bees in the country. It is a critical time when bees require abundant and diverse forage across broad landscapes to build up hive strength for the winter. To attract pollinators, an area must have adequate sources of food, shelter, and nesting sites. A variety of wildflowers and grasses will provide pollinators with food. Through CSP and other partnership programs, the Center also constructed a shallow water habitat for wildlife and pollinators. Vegetative enhancements being done will benefit species such as monarch butterflies and dragonflies, as well as other pollinators. "It's fascinating to see the wildlife that moves in when you restore these habitats," said Knickelbine.

Woodland Dunes land also houses thousands of honey bees. The Center is a meeting place for the Manitowoc County Beekeeper's Association, and some local beekeepers have hives on Woodland Dunes property. Many active hives are flourishing and more beekeepers are inquiring about placing hives on the Center's acreage, due to their thriving pollinator habitat and plans for establishing more pollinator-friendly habitat. "Many of our neighbors also have hives close to the property and produce honey, so the pollinator habitat helps benefit other landowners too," said Jennifer Powell, Woodland Dunes Land Management Coordinator. The Center has additional pollinator plantings planned on other parcels for FY2016 and beyond. EQIP assistance through the Honey Bee Pollinator Effort provides guidance and support to farmers

and ranchers to implement conservation practices that provide safe and diverse food sources for honey bees.

The Center is also working on forest habitat restoration to remove invasive plants and establish additional native plantings to benefit insects and migratory birds. "We're removing invasive shrubs and trees and replacing them with natives; we're already seeing an increase in species and numbers compared to areas where non-natives have taken over," explains Powell. "These practices directly align with the mission of our organization and management plans for our land, as they benefit wildlife of many species and help maintain biological diversity within our preserves. This, in turn, benefits our visitors and their experience here, and helps us educate more effectively about natural history and habitat management," said Knickelbine. Through the help of NRCS programs, Woodland Dunes has been able to apply conservation practices to the land, resulting in increased habitat for more diverse species. "We're even seeing some insects, like praying mantises, we haven't seen before," explains Knickelbine. Recently, the Center acquired additional acres through donation. The Center is partnering with NRCS to plan new projects available to assist in improving habitat on those and other areas within the

*"As a small non-profit, we greatly value our partnership with the NRCS and are very appreciative these programs are available and this kind of technical and financial assistance is huge in helping us meet our goals." ~Jim Knickelbine*

preserve. "As a result, we are participating in programs that enhance not only our grasslands but wetlands and forested areas as well, for the benefit of wildlife, especially birds and pollinating insects, as well as managing invasive species," said Knickelbine.

Woodland Dunes is also working with nearby landowners to discuss the benefits of technical and financial assistance through NRCS programs. "We are very pleased at the positive relationship we have with neighboring landowners with whom we also work to improve habitat. In fact, two of them are also applying to enroll their lands in NRCS programs," said Knickelbine. "Many landowners are willing to implement positive land management practices on their properties, but themselves lack expertise or the resources to carry them out. Conservation plans administered by NRCS provide both of those, and they benefit the landowner, the public, and wildlife."

"Woodland Dunes was formed specifically to preserve a priceless, globally important natural area, and the NRCS has been incredibly helpful in that effort," said Knickelbine. "As a small non-profit, we greatly value our partnership with the NRCS and are very appreciative these programs are available and this kind of technical and financial assistance is huge in helping us meet our goals."