

## Fledgling Floodplain Attracts Endangered Crane

by Jody Christiansen, USDA-NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

Who would believe that within a year of restoring a floodplain, an endangered species could find a newly restored wetland along an Illinois River? But more important, it is a breeding pair of whooping cranes. These cranes are considered one of the most endangered wetland dependant species in North America. To have a pair stop along their migration, well, "it was spectacular," said Dave Hiatt, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) wildlife biologist.

Immediately after its restoration, the floodplain in Lawrence County began storing rainwater and floodwaters, creating an oasis for migrating and regional wildlife. The area provided food and shelter for birds and mammals all winter. "To see an endangered species return to former migration patterns so soon is remarkable," said Bill Gradle, NRCS State Conservationist. "This is a real testament to what these restored floodplains have to offer."



Whooping cranes, along with mallard, teal, shoveler and pintail ducks, on a recently restored floodplain funded through the Recovery Act of 2010.

(Photographer: landowner Ray McCormick)

The land resides in the historical Purgatory Swamp which lies between the Wabash and Embarras Rivers. Over time it has been drained and farmed. "When I first saw this land I thought it was fantastic for restoration," said landowner Ray McCormick. "It was a restoration just waiting to happen." It didn't take long for the 330 acre site to respond. As soon as the restoration work was completed, the rains came and it began ponding water. After the winter thaw, the river swelled and created a nice wet area that apparently was attractive for the pair of whooping cranes. The cranes had previously been banded as 2009 No.4 Female and 2004 No. 16 Male, according to a source from the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge and Wildlife Management Area.

Another important feature of this floodplain is its location. Hiatt says, "This particular floodplain easement is located within a contiguous area of 453 acres of floodplains along the Embarras River." It is becoming evident, contiguous wetlands like these offer significant benefits for wildlife. Additional benefits include flood prevention downstream and water quality protection.

The floodplain restoration was one of 11 restorations in Illinois funded through the Administration's 2010 America's Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act). The NRCS used Recovery Act funding to offer landowners the opportunity to apply through the Emergency Watershed Protection - Floodplain Easement Program (EWP-FPE). The goal was to take cropland in flood prone areas out of production and restore the land back to original conditions.

Though restoring a floodplain is not a quick process, it is obvious some benefits are visible almost immediately. Not only have the whooping cranes arrived, but the landowner has noticed a large increase of ducks and other waterfowl. "This is a great program," said McCormick, "I encourage birdwatchers to come out and enjoy. I believe the public has the right see these areas. USDA wetland programs are just what the whoopers ordered."

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