

Wildlife Notes

by Ray Toor, NRCS Biologist



Timberdoodle, Night Partridge, Mud Bat, and Bog Sucker are all common names of the American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) which is a migratory shorebird that utilizes forested wetlands, fields, and riparian areas. The American Woodcock is a short-legged, plump bird, with a 2 ½ inch long bill, which it uses to probe the soil in search of earthworms. The bill is flexible and can be opened near the tip even when it is beneath the ground surface. The woodcock's head is gray and brown with black bars across the crown. Its large eyes are set far back on its head for increased peripheral vision, and the wings are short, wide, and rounded to facilitate flying in dense cover. The male and female are similar in appearance, but the female woodcock is slightly larger. In late January and February, woodcock begin to migrate north. In Kentucky, in mid-March to early April the male birds begin performing courtship flights at dusk in forest openings called "singing grounds". The display consists of a series of spiraling flights interspersed with ground-strutting during which the male utters a nasal "peent" repeatedly. Each evening's activities may last 30 to 60 minutes and may consist of 10 to 20 such performances. The nest is a shallow depression lined with leaves, usually located less than 100 yards from the singing ground, and constructed in young stands of hardwoods. Four brown, pink, and gray mottled eggs are laid and incubated for 19 to 22 days. The females hold tight to the nest, relying on their protective coloration, and flushing only when almost touched. Females are solely responsible for the incubation and care of the chicks. The young leave the nest one day after hatching, and follow the female throughout the feeding area. Fully feathered and capable of flying at 2 weeks of age, young woodcocks mature quickly and appear almost full grown at 4 weeks. They tend to remain in the nesting area until the fall migration begins in November.

The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan (USSCP) lists the woodcock as a Species of High Concern, and as a species known or thought to be declining. Woodcock are listed by The USFWS as a Game Bird Below Desired Condition. They are listed on the Audubon Watchlist's "yellow list" of those species that are in slow decline and of national conservation concern. Woodcock populations were highest when working farms and forestlands dotted the landscape. Brushy field edges, stream banks, fallow fields, bottomland hardwood wetlands, and managed woodlots provided the mosaic of habitats that woodcock depended upon. The decline in woodcock populations is suspected to be primarily the result of changes in land use, which have reduced or degraded early succession habitat and wetlands. In Kentucky, the Wetlands Reserve Program is restoring critical habitat requirements of the woodcock through bottomland hardwood restoration. Our hope is to increase populations of woodcock throughout the Commonwealth.



On a recent monitoring visit to a WRP site in Todd County, Charlie Plush, WRP team Wildlife Biologist with the KDFWR, observed a woodcock brood foraging next to a constructed shallow-water area on the easement.



MAY 2012

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Please visit our website
<http://www.ky.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/2012WRP/index.html>



This publication is an informational letter directed to landowners.

Enrollment in Wetlands Reserve Program on the Rise...

A few reasons to enroll

by Jack Kuhn, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist

Over 140 landowners have enrolled over 18,000 acres into the WRP program in Kentucky since 1996. What motivates landowners to offer their land into a wetlands conservation easement program? Interestingly, the answer to that question is complicated and varies from person to person and year to year. We have observed that the motivation may depend somewhat upon the landowner. In Kentucky, WRP participants are varied, including young farmers, farmers nearing retirement age, heirs of family farms, absentee landowners, conservation groups, and hunting groups.



Active farmers often enroll former wetlands into WRP in order to retire wet or flood-prone fields from production in order to purchase better cropland. When reoccurring floods result in crop losses, farmers may decide that retiring flood-prone cropland and investing those funds into better land makes good business sense.

Many Kentucky WRP participants are approaching retirement age. When younger members of the family have chosen careers away from the farm, participation in WRP allows the farm to remain in the family while reducing the effort to manage the farm for crop production. The family may also enjoy enhanced recreational opportunities, allowing younger members the chance to stay connected to the family farm. Some landowners may have always dreamed of their own hunting lands to enjoy with their grandchildren; or want to leave the land in the family but disperse cash assets while they are alive.

Hunting groups are particularly interested in the multiple benefits participation in WRP offers. The easement payment helps offset land purchase investments, and the wetland restoration is designed and implemented with migratory waterfowl as a primary objective. Other landowners may deed an easement to protect the land into the future, for the love of wildlife or passion for the outdoors.

Whatever the reason, an easement payment can open up a whole range of opportunities while allowing you to retain ownership of your land.

Monitoring of Easements



Tree survival review after third growing season



Review of wildlife utilizing easement



Review of shallow water development



Review of signs and posts defining easement boundary



Review of uses such as food plots that require compatible use authorization

Each year the Easement Team monitors the project areas through site reviews. You will be notified by letter when we plan to visit and are invited to attend. However your attendance is not required. If you have any issues or concerns, the visit provides a great opportunity for us to talk in person. Some of the things the Team will be reviewing during the site visit include:

Effectiveness of restoration activities: Do the restoration practices on the easement agree with what was planned? Are there repairs needed? Do we need to modify the restoration plan?

Ingress/egress and easement boundary: Are there any encroachment problems with adjacent landowners? Is there a “dumping or waste pile” situation? Are all of the signs and posts delineating the easement present? Is the ingress/egress accessible by a four wheel drive vehicle?

Tree establishment: Immediately after planting, a tree count is completed to ensure planting rate and spacing is accurate. Trees are reviewed each year. The third growing season trees will be checked for survivability. The team will check survivability at the initial sampling location during the tree count.

Wildlife Habitat: Is restoration successfully providing wildlife benefits? Per discussion with landowner, has he/she seen an improvement in wildlife?

Hydrology: Check overall functions, stability of levee, vegetation, maintenance of water control structure, spillway stability, rodent problems, and trash and management issues.

Management and maintenance: Does the landowner understand the need for authorization to complete management and maintenance activities? Are current compatible use agreements being followed?

Prohibited Activities

- Dumping waste
- Construction of permanent buildings
- Draining, dredging, or filling of restored acres
- Diverting water onto or out of easement
- Installation of electric lines
- Livestock access
- Planting crops
- Harvest of wood products



Flooding 2011

Facing the Flood by Ashley Hoffman, Wetlands Team Biologist

In 1937, Paducah faced its worst natural disaster in history when the Ohio River crested at 60.8 feet, flooding the city and forcing 27,000 residents to evacuate to higher ground for a number of weeks. There was no floodwall and the earthen levees did little to prevent water from flowing freely through the city. Taking place in the middle of winter, loss of clean water, no electricity, and failed sewer systems led to widespread disease. Thousands were left homeless. An exhibit at the River Discovery Center in downtown Paducah stands to remind us of that tragic time in Paducah's history. Following that event, the Army Corp of Engineers built the 12.2 mile levee that now protects Paducah from the ravages of the Ohio River.

West Kentucky is often referred to as the Four Rivers Watershed. Historically, much of this area was wetlands, woodlands and prairie. Today, having some of the most fertile soils in the state, much of the area has been converted to agricultural fields. We are surrounded by the Ohio, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers, all of which dump into the Mighty Mississippi. The Mississippi River is the largest river system in North America and the third largest in the world, draining approximately 31 of the 50 states and running 2,530 miles from northern Minnesota down to the Gulf of Mexico.

While the memory of the 1937 flood has faded for many, last year's floods served as a vivid reminder that we cannot always control Mother Nature but can be thankful for the floodwall that protected Paducah and other cities from facing extensive damage like that which took place in '37. Some of the more rural areas were not so fortunate. The Army Corp of Engineers was forced to breach several levees in floodplain areas of Missouri to ease flooding pressure in more populated areas, forcing residents in rural areas of Missouri to evacuate, hoping their homes might be spared. These areas had flooding easements placed on them in 1928, which gave the Corp the right to flood them, if needed. However, legal action taken by landowners and homeowners in these areas prevented the Corp from blowing the levees until the river was a good four feet higher than planned for. This caused a significant amount of damage to the croplands and it is still unclear how these areas will be restored. The breaching of the levee resulted in the flooding of 133,000 acres, the loss of 2011 crops and damaged soil productivity. Most of the 133,000 acres that were flooded have been out of production for the last year due to the widespread damage. The current coming through the breached levee at Birds Point, MO caused gullies several feet deep, displaced tons of soil, and deposited large amounts of sand in its place. Most of the farms, home and equipment in the area were severely damaged. It is unclear how these gully lands will be restored. A large amount of highly productive soil was lost and will be difficult to replace. Fortunately, because the Army National Guard swept the area before the levees were blown, there was no loss of life in the floodways.

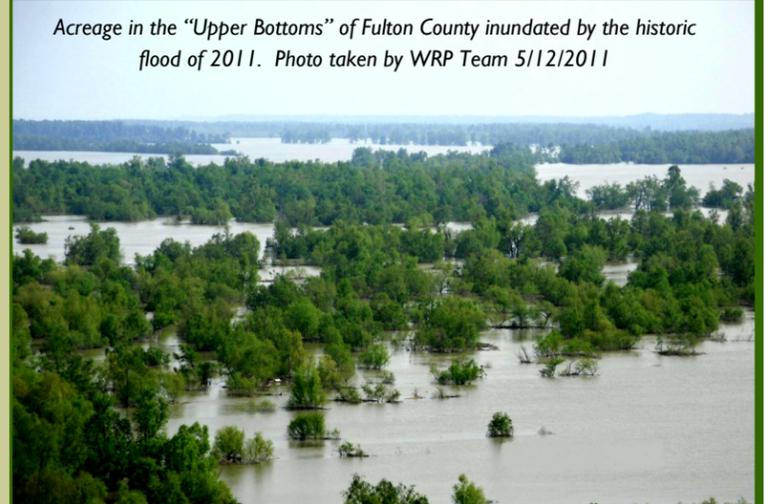
Drive through the Upper Bottoms of Hickman and Fulton counties in Kentucky and you will see a number of signs high up in the trees bearing the words “5/2/11 61.7”. As those affected continue to rebuild from the devastation of last year's flood, these signs serve as a reminder of the record breaking levels reached by the Mississippi River in 2011, a reminder we hope not to have again.



Sign depicting how high the flood waters were on May 2, 2011 - record high 61.7 feet. Photo taken in Upper Bottoms of Fulton County



Photo of stabilization efforts for sand boils along COE levee in Fulton County..



Acreage in the “Upper Bottoms” of Fulton County inundated by the historic flood of 2011. Photo taken by WRP Team 5/12/2011

County	WRP Acreage
Ballard	1,010.69
Bath	94.10
Butler	352.00
Calloway	193.58
Carlisle	193.86
Casey	601.90
Christian	214.40
Clinton	54.30
Crittenden	985.74
Fleming	81.00
Fulton	3,260.37
Graves	134.75
Green	26.30
Henderson	1,905.43
Hickman	786.83
Hopkins	411.23
Lincoln	276.23
Livingston	535.15
Logan	252.20
McCracken	1,897.32
McLean	58.40
Marion	109.80
Marshall	1,215.45
Metcalfe	22.10
Monroe	18.10
Muhlenberg	313.70
Ohio	32.87
Nelson	199.40
Pendleton	37.50
Pulaski	150.00
Rowan	114.95
Todd	343.73
Union	2,091.76
Warren	11.00
Washington	62.67
Wayne	63.78
Webster	344.21
Total	18,456.80

**Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative-MRBI
Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program-WREP**

The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) is a voluntary conservation program that provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to restore, protect and enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring eligible land from agriculture. This project is being funded through the USDA-NRCS Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI). The health of the Mississippi River is dependent upon the health of its tributaries and these watersheds have been determined to be of national importance to the Lower Mississippi River. This area was historically dominated by forests and wetlands, but the large majority has been cleared and converted to other uses. There is, however, a tremendous opportunity for restoration. Within this area, NRCS and partners will work with interested landowners to help protect and restore wetlands, streams, and bottomland hardwood forest. This project was funded in July 2011 and has the potential to bring in over 20 million dollars of federal funding during the four year project. This funding will go directly to landowners for the protection and restoration of wetland acres.

Compared to the seven surrounding states, Kentucky has the smallest percentage of protected land, with less than 2% being in permanent conservation protection. This makes conservation, in general, and of wetlands in particular, extremely important on private lands. During the period of 1780 to 1980, wetlands in Kentucky declined from about 1.6 million acres to about 300,000 acres. This is a decrease of over 80%, compared to national wetland losses of about 50% during that same time frame. Within Kentucky, the majority of these wetland losses occurred through conversion of Bottomland Hardwood Forests to agricultural fields in the western part of the state. This loss of forested habitat has contributed to declines in migratory bird and bat populations and the conversion to row crop agriculture has caused water quality degradation through an increase in sediment and nutrient loading.

Landowners in Fulton, Hickman, Carlisle, Graves and Ballard counties along the targeted watersheds of Mayfield Creek, Obion Creek and Bayou de Chien may be eligible for the program. Some properties may qualify for additional per acre incentives. Talk to a team member for more information.

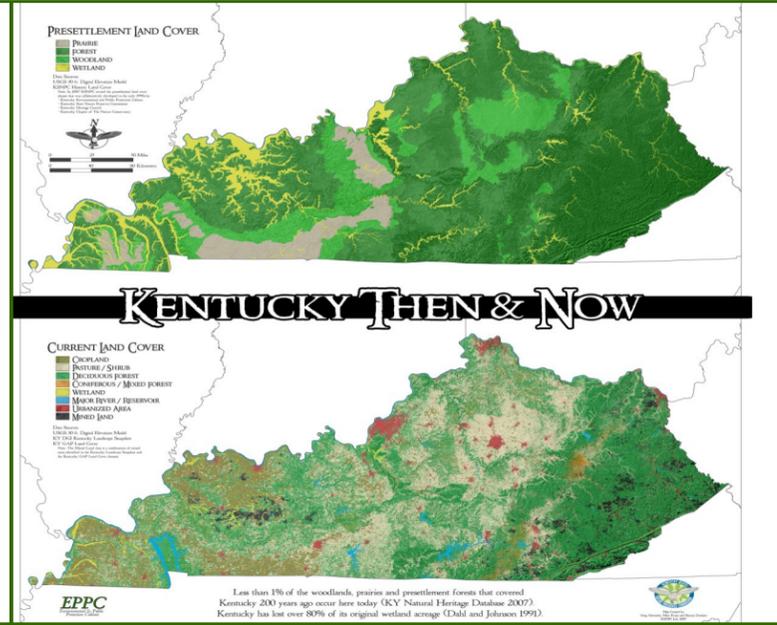
- Objectives:**
- Reduce nutrient and sediment loads entering the Mississippi River through restoration of approximately 5500 acres utilizing WREP.
 - Restore and protect approximately 10 miles of riparian habitat along Obion Creek and Bayou du Chien.
 - Improve and protect habitat for the federally-endangered Indiana Bat and for other wetland associated wildlife.

WREP TEAM



Restoring America's Wetlands Heritage

WREP Team Members from left to right: Jason Combs, SCA intern; Donna Gilland, Resource Conservationist; Ashley Hoffman, WRP biologist; Carl Hannon, WRP technician; and Shelly Morris, Western Kentucky Project Director for The Nature Conservancy.



Compatible Use Agreements

By purchasing a WRP easement, the NRCS acquires all land management rights on the enrolled acreage. Landowners may request authorization from NRCS to conduct certain management practices through a Compatible Use Agreement (CUA). These agreements may only be granted when those uses are consistent with both the long-term protection and enhancement of wetland functions and values of the easement. The WRP Team will assist the landowner in the completion of the authorization form. Attached to the form will be the special conditions and specifications of the authorization. These special conditions will specify the terms of activity, method, frequency, timing, intensity, and duration. Authorizations will be granted for a specific period of time, one to ten years, depending on the type of compatible use requested and at the discretion of NRCS. NRCS retains the right to modify or cancel the CUA at any time if it is determined that the compatible use is in conflict with program objectives and protection and enhancement of the easement, program policy changes concerning the issuance of compatible uses or the landowner violates the terms of the compatible use agreement or easement.

Examples of CUAs:

Native Grass Management—Mowing, chemical use, prescribed burning, and disking may be allowed if deemed necessary by NRCS or recommended by the KDFWR biologist to manage the grassland for optimum wildlife habitat.

Mowing of Dikes, Access Roads and Perimeter Boundary — These areas can be mowed, as needed, between July 15 and September 1 if a compatible use agreement is approved.

Shallow Water Areas—NRCS can grant authorizations that will allow landowners to operate water control structures and maintain early successional vegetation in the pool areas by varying the water level to mimic natural conditions to the fullest extent practical, and could be coupled with mowing and disking to promote desirable vegetation for waterfowl and migratory birds.

Wildlife Openings (Food Plots)—Authorization may be granted for the implementation of cultural practices that promote the growth of desirable vegetation, including annual weeds and standing crops in designated upland and wetland areas.

Temporary Hunting Blinds— The construction and maintenance of temporary hunting blinds is now allowed on the easement area as part of the landowners reserved rights of hunting provided they are portable, non-enduring and cause no site disturbance to set up or remove. NRCS will be issuing guidance on allowable structures on the easement area in the near future.



Native Grass Management



Shallow Water Area Mgt



Mowing Perimeter Boundary



Wildlife Openings-Food Plot



Temporary Hunting Structure

From a Landowner Perspective...

Hear from landowners who've already been through the process themselves. NRCS spoke to several landowners currently enrolled in WRP across the state to get their perspective on the Wetlands Reserve Program and how it has worked for them. Read on to hear about their trials, successes, and words of advice regarding the program.



Riverside Farms, LLC - Washington County

Mike Jones is the owner/operator of Riverside Farms, LLC located in Washington County, KY. Mr. Jones enrolled approximately 63 acres of his farm into the Wetlands Reserve Program in 2008. He is the first landowner in Washington County to enroll in WRP. In addition to his 29 acres of existing wetland habitat, his restoration plan included establishing 7.7 acres of shallow water through the installation of 1 ditch plug and 2 dikes. He is also in the process of establishing approximately 30 acres of bottomland hardwood tree planting and 4 acres of native warm season grasses to improve wildlife habitat on the easement.

How did you find out about the Wetlands Reserve Program?

I saw a flyer in the local NRCS field office. I had an existing wetland that I wanted to protect so I began talking with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources WRP biologist Wes Little and soil conservation technician Joe Carpenter in the Springfield field office about enrolling a portion of my bottomland into the program.

What problems were occurring on the land?

The fields were a little wet and it made it expensive to farm the ground. I was unable to get my equipment into the fields at times to be able to grow crops consistently in those areas.

Do you feel that your farming operation benefitted by enrolling acreage into the Wetlands program?

Absolutely. I have been able to make several improvements to my operation, but the best part is being able to enjoy seeing more wildlife on my property from the improved wildlife habitat. I enjoy being able to hunt on the property and knowing that I will be able to enjoy it for years to come.

From a landowner perspective what changes would you suggest in the process?...think of parts of the process that you found difficult, took too long, or maybe the people were difficult!

I have been satisfied with the overall process. I would like to see a more common sense approach to the policy and some more flexibility in the standards that I have to follow, but overall everyone has been great to work with.

Would you recommend the program to another landowner?

Yes I would. I am planning to host a field day for the local conservation district on my property to showcase the success of enrolling my farm in the program to allow other local landowners that might be interested in the program to see the benefits of enrollment.

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From a Landowner Perspective...

Mark Putman - Christian County



Mr. Putman recently enrolled 39 acres in the northeast part of Christian County. NRCS just completed the acquisition process last fall and a cultural resource investigation is scheduled for this year. Restoration will begin in 2013. Mr. Putman gave us his perspective on the easement acquisition process:

I had seen a WRP brochure in the Hopkinsville NRCS office. However, Marty Lewis was the first person that suggested I look into the program. My bottom fields were very wet and it was very hard each year to get a crop planted or harvested. These are the acres that I chose to apply for the wetlands program. Once restoration is done I think the wildlife and hunting will be enhanced.

I received an offer in August 2010. It was a real blessing for me. I was able to pay the note down and keep the family farm. Throughout the entire process I have been involved with all decisions regarding the acquisition activities. My hats off to NRCS in Hopkinsville, Madisonville, Mayfield and Lexington.

The only downside to the whole process is nothing happens fast and it can be frustrating. Now that I have more experience with the process I have a better understanding of the huge workload for a relatively small staff. Donna Gilland did caution me at the start and she was right. When you get the offer it is not like buying a house. You will NOT close in 90-180 days, So, don't spend it too quickly!

Ed Anthony - McCracken County



Mr. Anthony owns 473 acres currently enrolled in WRP in McCracken County. NRCS purchased the easement in 2000 and completed the tree establishment in 2003 and hydrology development in 2004. The historic flooding of 2011 covered the entire acreage with 6 feet of water. Mr. Anthony gave us his perspective on the flooding and how it impacted the easement:

Do you think the vegetation is recovering from the flood?

I was really worried about the trees after the water finally went down. The flooding definitely impacted their growth last year but, after our review this week I would say the survival percentage is high.

How about your levees? Did you have any erosion problems after the flood?

All the levees (estimated 6000 linear feet) are in good shape. The vegetation is sparse in some places but looks to be improving this year. There are 10 water control structures throughout the easement for impoundment of shallow water for moist soil units and green tree reservoirs. The high water did not impact the function of any of the structures.

Have you seen improvements in the wildlife?

Before the flood we were covered up with deer...the flood pushed them out and they are now beginning to return. Turkey population is looking good.

What has been your biggest benefit of enrolling your farm into the WRP?

Just the enjoyment of the property by my family, whether we are hunting or just watching wildlife.

Would you recommend the program?

At today's commodity prices it would just boil down to a business decision.

What would you change in the restoration?

I would not plant any Ash trees!...especially along the corridors that deer browse for food. I also would reconsider the amount of native grass planted.