



Native Grasses, Forbs and Oak Savannas Aplenty

Wildlife Habitat Flourishes Through SAFE Program Partnership



Above: (L to R) David and Jessica Gales, SAFE program participants; Cory Drummond, NRCS Fond du Lac District Conservationist; Brian Kind, NRCS Fond du Lac Soil Conservation Technician; and Erv Lesczynski, Rock River Watershed Planner.

David and Jessica Gales own property located in the Glacial Habitat Safe Acres for Wildlife Enhance (SAFE) area in Fond du Lac County, Wis. The Gales restored their 36 acres into upland nesting cover on five fields, and added a shallow water area to complement the adjacent wetland acreage, just north of the west branch of the Fond du Lac River. This restoration was in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), Ducks Unlimited, Wings over Wisconsin, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “All the local partners pulled together to make this project possible and provide assistance for planning, seed, planting, and more. We couldn’t have done this project without NRCS and FSA’s key partnership along with all the partner’s cooperation,” said Erv Lesczynski, Rock River Watershed Planner.

The Glacial Habitat Restoration SAFE Area offers FSA’s Conservation Reserve Program Practices and NRCS technical planning assistance to provide enhanced habitat for bobolinks, eastern meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrow, Henslow’s sparrows, and ring-necked pheasant. The goal is to establish a mosaic of grasslands and wetlands in a predominately agricultural landscape, resulting in more favorable habitat conditions for self-sustaining populations of waterfowl, pheasants and grassland songbirds. “We were looking for potential sites that would do well with native grasslands and savannas and also allow shallow scrapes in the Fond du Lac area to add wildlife habitat. The Gales property was a great place for the SAFE program to work effectively. NRCS specifically worked to design and locate the 1/3 acre scrape, overseeing construction in the winter,” said Brian Kind, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician. “We were worried about soil erosion with the rented, conventionally farmed fields; we feel like we’re giving back to the land by turning it into a more native habitat,” said Jessica.

“We heard about the SAFE program through a conservation partner, the Wild Turkey Federation,” said David. “Setting the timelines is very important for SAFE. We planned a year in advance with the Gales and involved them every step of the way,” said Erv. With SAFE, project contracts can begin anytime of the year. The Gales started their contract in October 2015, enrolling 20 acres for 15 years, and did their first planting the following spring. Jake Vande Berg, Fond du Lac County Executive Director with the Farm Service Agency added, “Advanced planning works well for enrolling acres into the Conservation Reserve Program. The great partnership between FSA, NRCS, and other partners working on this project maximized the benefits and timing of contract enrollment.”

Each of the five fields the Gales planted have a different species mix depending on the soil type and amount of moisture. “We knew the cropped field was previously in soybeans and that crop provides great residue to plant into,” added Erv. Four fields have various mixes of upland plantings, including native grasses and forbs. “A custom, multi-species mix was used, including 5 native grasses and 3 main flowering forbs, black eyed susan, yellow cone flower and bergamot,” said Cory Drummond, Fond du Lac County NRCS District Conservationist. “There is also some yellow cone flower and the Gales are also encouraging milkweed establishment for pollinators.” The largest field was planted as an oak savanna with burr oak, white oak, black oak, hickory and swamp lights. “We planted over 460 trees in this planting, over 4 days of work; the oak savanna has many more forbs than the other fields,” said David. The Gales have gone the extra mile and completed various tree and shrub plantings on acres not enrolled in the program. With technical and planning assistance from NRCS, the Gales also installed a shallow water area as part of their SAFE contract.

“The savanna and grasslands really hold the wildlife and habitat in and provide food and shelter for them,” said Jessica.



“We’ve seen hens and baby turkeys, various frogs, turtles, snakes, pheasants, deer, geese, ducks, pelicans; so many different species! We listen to the frogs all night.” “The farm now has large blocks of cover and they have a large amount of duck nesting going on,” said Erv. With new plantings, come new challenges and opportunities for management. “We are dealing with Canada thistle in some of the fields. It’s one of the biggest problems with native grassland and savanna plantings,” said Erv. “Compared to other plantings I’ve seen, the Gales property doesn’t have much at all because they are doing active weed management,” said Erv. The Gales are properly managing their SAFE habitat by actively doing weed management in problem spots. “We are also planning to get a pull behind mower to do more strategic mowing in the smaller affected areas next year,” explained David. “This has really been a family effort the whole way through.”

David and Jessica grew up hunting and fishing and have two daughters who also love the outdoors, Betsy (10), and Millie (7). “Both the girls love hunting and fishing with mom and dad. It’s important our girls understand this healthy land isn’t always going to be here unless we take care of it,” said Jessica. The Gales have made efforts to show their daughters the importance of conservation by doing their part on the land they own to plant native habitat and native trees. “It gives them a real life understanding to not take healthy land, clean water and all our natural resources for granted,” said Jessica. “Living out in the country exposes them to many new things. Just seeing wildlife and understanding the cycle of life gives them good exposure to how the natural world works.” The Gales take conservation education one step further by having their kid’s friends out often, taking them around the flourishing property to show different plants, trees, forbs, beneficial insects and animals. Jessica adds, “It’s our chance to give back a little.”

The Gales were nominated and recently received the NWTF Local Stewardship Award and also won



the Statewide Award. “It was really nice to have our hard work recognized for the conservation efforts we have made on our property,” said Jessica. The Gales have influenced neighbors and partners to follow suit in their wildlife habitat endeavors. This past summer they hosted a NRCS and FSA joint training session on working with USDA to accomplish restoration goals at their acreage. “The Gales have been very hospitable, allowing NRCS and FSA employees on their property and opening up their site as a training opportunity to see a successfully completed SAFE project. It was a nice experience to allow employees an opportunity to see conservation on the ground through this finished project and to learn specifics about the process,” said Cory.

NRCS, FSA, the Gales and all the partners realize the success of this SAFE project. “I like the look and natural feel of it; I love watching the wildlife in the shallow water habitat area; it looks like it’s always been that way. We see so many bees and butterflies now too; so, not just animal species, but beneficial insects also,” said Jessica. “We’ve held many meetings and tours with different groups; we’re always willing to learn new things and answer questions, we’re up front about how good the program is; everyone has been great in providing information,” said Jessica. “NRCS and FSA collaborating and working together in Fond du Lac enabled us to get this job done,” said Drummond. Vande Berg also agreed, “It took the cooperation of all partners for this project to be a success. Working together as One USDA for our landowners provides countless benefits to the land and the local community.” The USDA agencies look forward to many more years of partnership with the Gales on this SAFE project success.



Clockwise: Jessica Gales and Cory Drummond inspect different savanna species.

Wildlife enjoying the shallow water habitat.

Beneficial species, like milkweed and yellow coneflower are spread throughout the grassland acres.

Even Cooper, the Gale’s dog, enjoys tracking daily through the restored grasslands on the way to the shallow water area.

