

Trees and Buffers Boost Pheasants

Pheasant hunting is a time-honored tradition for Gary Olsen and his family. An Audubon County, Iowa native, Olsen remembers seeing plenty of pheasants on the home farm when he hunted as a boy in the 1960's. In the 90's however, the pheasant numbers dropped off on the Olsen's land and the successful hunting trips dropped off along with them.

Olsen's two sons, brother-in-law, three nephews and a niece all like to hunt. So he knew something had to be done to bring the pheasants back to his farm. CRP was the answer.

"In the 90's, we had to hunt anywhere we could just to see birds," Olsen said. "Our own farms just didn't have the pheasants anymore. We decided we wouldn't need to hunt anywhere else if we put pheasant friendly habitats on our own land."

Olsen Family Trusts

Before he passed away, Olsen's father and mother put three tracts of land in Audubon County into trusts for Olsen and his sister. Together, the Marion Olsen and Evelyn Olsen Trusts total 600 acres. Olsen entered some of those lands into USDA's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), in an effort to bring back the pheasant hunting that he and his family enjoy.

"We have about 30 acres of trees and 60 acres of grass in riparian buffers on the three farms," Olsen said. "Another 175 acres—25 in trees and shrubs—in the general CRP brings the total CRP acres to 265."

CRP Trees, Grasses Pay Wildlife Dividends

The results of converting to CRP speak for themselves. "In 1999, before the buffers were planted, we harvested two pheasants on this farm," Olsen said.

After the grasses and trees started growing, so did pheasant numbers.



Riparian buffers tie four generations together on the three Olsen farm trusts. From left, Gary Olsen, his mother Evelyn, Gary's son Doug and wife Nicki, and their children Marcus and Claire.

"I kept track and in 2001, we harvested nine pheasants," Olsen said. "In 2002, it went to thirteen. In 2003, the harvest number went to twenty one."

The numbers continued to grow with a whopping 30 pheasants harvested in 2004.

Variety of Trees, Shrubs and Grasses

Olsen planted a wide variety of grasses in the CRP acres. Grasses planted include big bluestem, little bluestem, sideoats grama, switchgrass, and Indian grass.

"I like the big bluestem, but it is difficult to walk through as a hunter," Olsen said. "In future plantings, I'll use shorter grasses."

The trees planted include silver maple, black willow, cottonwood, swamp white oak, pin oak, and green ash, along with many other varieties. The shrubs used included American cranberry, ninebark, nanking cherry, and American plum.



Gary Olsen has planted nearly 60 acres to trees on three farms in Audubon County.

“The first planting in 2000 included 7200 trees and 5000 shrubs,” Olsen said. “Since then, I’ve added another 42,625 trees and shrubs.”

Habitat is Hard Work

In addition to tree and grass planting, Olsen made other changes to the CRP land to improve wildlife habitats. He has established contour grass buffers and sorghum food plots, and planted chickery, turnips, ladino clover and rape on the farm. Olsen also has three farm ponds and has doubled the width of his grassed waterways.

Olsen hired the planting but he handles the maintenance. Gary mowed and sprayed for thistles with permission from the Farm Service Agency. He admits it was a lot of work.

“I hope I’m finished mowing now,” Olsen said.

Olsen also burned for the first time last spring. “We burned 10 acres,” Olsen said. “Burning is compatible with wildlife if you burn at the right time and don’t burn too many acres in any one year.”

Help from Professionals

Olsen couldn’t have done all this work and planning without a little help. Ken Snyder and Jon Judson were key advisors. Snyder is a Pheasants Forever promoter from nearby Carroll County. Judson, who did all the planting, owns Diversity Farms.

“Ken helped me make the decision to plant buffers. He and Jon were my mentors,” Olsen said. “I didn’t realize there was so much help available to establish habitat with these buffers. They gave me the help I needed.”

Olsen says credit is also due to DNR foresters Paul Tauke and Jeremy Cochran, and Dennis Heflin, Jan, Nancy, and staff at the FSA office as well as David Brand, Steve, and others at the NRCS office.

Benefits of CRP Multiply

Aside from bumper pheasant crops, Olsen has seen unexpected benefits from CRP plantings.

“In those trees, I wouldn’t have believed the number of nests that would be made. We see lots of meadow larks and goldfinches,” Olsen said. “We’ve seen turkeys and deer, of course. But we’ve also seen quail and Hungarian partridges. We hadn’t seen quail before.”

Olsen has also made jam from the nanking cherry and plum butter from the American plum.

Financial and Personal Rewards

“It makes sense economically to plant trees and grasses into these buffers with CRP,” Olsen said.



Sorghum food plots help wildlife on his farm, but the real habitat is tree and grass riparian buffers planted along streams, Olsen says.

Olsen is quick to point out that it makes sense for other reasons as well. His trees and grasses and other wildlife habitats provide a break from his job at the Friendship Home in nearby Audubon.

“I enjoy them,” Olsen said. “You can’t put a value on these trees and grasses.”



Gary and his son Doug, along with other offspring and their families, are avid hunters and active in Pheasants Forever.



Since they’ve planted trees as part of riparian buffers, Gary (right) and son Doug Olsen have watched their annual pheasant harvest numbers grow from 2 to 30.