

Goose Pond: A Wild Indiana Treasure

by Diana J. Ensign



*Roseate Spoonbill flies easier knowing
Goose Pond provides a safe resting place.
Photo by Jim Sullivan*

Driving south along State Highway 59, long stretches of flat yellow cornfields populate the landscape, broken up by occasional farmhouses and billboards. As you near Linton, Indiana, suddenly something different emerges: sparkling sunshine on a vast expanse of water, large white birds swooping through a blue sky, and, if you pull your car over and walk, you will hear the call of hawks, whooping cranes, frogs, egrets, bald eagles and shorebirds.

This is Goose Pond, Indiana's largest Wetlands Reserve Program. As Jane Hardisty, State Conservationist of the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service), says, "This 7,000-plus acre site in the heartland of Indiana is a National Treasure, one of the largest Wetlands Reserve Programs in the United States," and for those in the NRCS, it has been ten years of hard work in the making.

After battles with local Greene County residents, problems with buried utility lines, piled-high stacks of paperwork, and numerous unexpected surprises, the recent blue-ribbon cutting ceremony to formally announce the completion of the Goose Pond Wetlands Reserve project provided much reason for celebration. Standing at the podium, Hardisty smiled broadly. "This is history, folks," she said. "When we all leave, Goose Pond will still be here. That is our legacy."

The Wetlands Reserve Program

Jerry Roach, State Wetlands Reserve Program Manager for NRCS, explains that the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is voluntary. He says, "It allows private landowners an opportunity to participate in the conservation and restoration of wetlands. The farmer is compensated for the wetland restoration easement and retains ownership of the land, along with the right to sell the land."

The NRCS (USDA/United States Department of Agriculture) manages the wetland program as well as providing technical and financial support to landowners who participate. The goal of WRP is to provide wetlands to migratory birds and wetland dependent species, including threatened and endangered species. Wetlands also improve water quality, reduce flooding, protect open space, and provide contributions to scientific and educational scholarship. According to Roach, there are approximately 600 WRP projects in the state. Goose Pond, which is over twice the size of any prior Indiana Wetland Restoration project, offered a "once in lifetime opportunity."

At the time of enrollment, the area known as the Goose Pond and Beehunter Marsh site had the largest single landowner of a WRP in the country. Roach notes, "We had to take Greene County's largest cornfield and try to restore it through a transition period and back to a wetland. That was a significant challenge."

Due to the size of the area, extensive restoration work was necessary, involving NRCS civil engineers, hydraulic engineers, biologists, soil specialists, survey workers, project managers and inspectors.

The project required coordination with adjacent landowners, the local community, contractors, politicians, farmers, utility and highway folks. NRCS formed partnerships with the Nature Conservancy, Cinergy, Indiana State University, IUPUI, Ducks Unlimited and the IDNR (Indiana Department of Natural Resources).

Roach says, "During the restoration, the area looked like a beehive of activity." But in the end, he says, "The proof is in the pudding."

On the 7,138-acre permanent easement, there are 350 acres of tree plantings, 1,300 acres of native prairie plantings, and 3,860 acres of shallow water wetlands, 36.2 miles of constructed levees, 42 water control structures, and 255 acres of macro topography.

The area is historically, biologically, culturally and economically significant. Moreover, there has been a tremendous response from the wildlife with wading birds, land birds, shorebirds, raptors, migratory birds, grassland species, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and numerous threatened and endangered species.

"This area has statewide and Midwest significance in terms of the restoration," Roach adds. "Goose Pond is a legacy passed on to benefit wildlife, the community, and generations to come."



*These Gadwall eggs are safe in the nest in the middle of Goose Pond prairie.
Photo by Lee Sterrenburg.*

What Mother Nature intended

The history of Goose Pond as a natural wetland extends back over a hundred years. According to Dave Stratman, NRCS State Biologist: "Goose Pond was an old glacial basin, which means when the last glacier came through, there was a big chunk of ice there. So when the ice melted, it created a large shallow basin, like a bowl." It is a low elevation piece of land. "The ditches that go through the area are actually higher than the field itself," he says.

For years, farmers tried to produce crops. They tried draining the area, digging ditches, installing underground tiles, and even built levies to keep the water in the ditches from flowing into the basin. Stratman says the clay content of the soil makes the land difficult to farm. "With the clay content, the soil does not absorb water well and once water is there, the clay doesn't let go. The clay did not provide much water for plant roots of crops such as corn or soybeans."

Because the water does not drain off the land, it had to be pumped out. "It was just a big hole and once it rained, there was no place for the water to go." The soil is like modeling clay. So it held water on the surface for long periods of time. "Basically," he says grinning, "you spit on it and it stays there for weeks."

According to Stratman, wetlands serve a variety of important functions. Wetlands act as a filter. "If the wetland is near a lake, the water will be filtered through the wetland before it gets to the lake and will help keep the lake clean."

Wetlands alongside a lake or river will serve as a buffer against extreme currents, so it cuts down on erosion. He notes that wetlands also serve as a groundwater recharge; the wetland holds the water long enough so it can soak into the ground and ground water.

In addition, wetlands assist with carbon issues.

Stratman says, "We are worried about the extra carbon in the air. Wetlands do a good job of storing carbon in the plant roots and in the organic layer that's at the top of the soil. When water and soil come together, they usually have that thick mucky layer. That layer holds a lot of carbon."

Stratman makes clear that wetlands also help prevent flooding to nearby homeowners. The Goose Pond and surrounding areas were subject to flooding. "Enormous amounts of resources went into producing a crop and often, those resources were flushed downstream."

Wetlands greatly benefit wildlife. "It's nice to take property that was only marginal cropland and of only marginal benefit and put it back to a wetland habitat for species that don't really have any other place to live," says Stratman. "A lot of these species can't live in upland woods, they can't live in urban settings, and they can't live in croplands. Their life cycles depend on water, plants that grow in the water, and the insects and other species living there." In this particular case, "nature wants this to be a place where wild things live and grow."

The community also benefits from wetlands. Goose Pond will provide an opportunity for people to interact with the wildlife and get a feel for what the wetlands are and what wetlands mean to them. Stratman says, "People can go from the words to actually experience what the call of the great blue heron sounds like or hear frogs jump in the water and see animals they don't typically see in their own backyard."

The NRCS restores land back to its best use. As Jane Hardisty notes, "With Goose Pond, farmers spent a lot of money trying to get Mother Nature to do something she didn't want to do." In the wetland restoration project, "we can put the area back to its best land use and help landowners get the best value from it."

Build it and they will come

Lee Sterrenburg of the Audubon Society expresses his excitement at the Goose Pond bird bonanza. He states, "Goose Pond is an unparalleled example of successful wetland

restoration in Indiana." He talks animatedly of the amazing things that happened once the restoration work was done.

"This property has the largest King Rail population in the entire inland migratory range of the species." He remarks upon the stunning seven different species that produced all time Indiana state record high counts, with Northern Pintail, Great Egret, Green Heron, Greater Yellowlegs, White Ibis, and the first confirmed state record of a Roseate Spoonbill which stayed 97 days, not to mention another 27 species of shorebirds. There were 17 bald eagles and three nesting bald eagles.

Sterrenburg emphasizes that Goose Pond has 36 species listed as endangered. The annual Goose Pond Christmas bird count recorded an all-time high count of 107 species. "There are over 17,000 bird records in the database. The response from birds was almost instantaneous and have exceeded all expectations in terms of numbers and diversity."

Goose Pond is located in the Mississippi flyway, a corridor for migrating birds. "Goose Pond is right in path with a lot of waterfowl flying north and south," says Stratman. "Birds don't take random paths. They follow patterns, like a braided weave. When the wetlands along the Wabash were drained, part of that flyway weave pattern no longer existed." The Goose Pond project is part of several very large Wetland Reserve Projects that NRCS has put together up and down the Wabash River to help re-establish part of the weave of the Mississippi flyway. As a result, Goose Pond is attracting some of the most diverse array of birds that anyone has ever seen in the state.

Stratman emphasizes that while it is exciting to see migration patterns re-established, Goose Pond also provides habitat for other threatened and endangered species. NRCS takes a holistic approach with a program that focuses on many species of wildlife. "We're dealing with birds that migrate up and down the flyway, but we're also helping endangered and threatened frogs, different types of amphibians, snakes, various mammals, and a whole host of wildlife that utilize wetlands."

As noted by Mike McGovern, NRCS Public Affairs Officer, "Water is life. There are osprey, beaver, muskrat, and mink. We have a habitat that brings insects, reptiles, bugs, and spiders that act as food for other species. The response from wildlife is basically because the water is there. We have all kinds of plant and species diversity." The wildlife response at Goose Pond has been astonishing and beyond all expectations.

All are in agreement: "Build wetlands and the wildlife will come." As Stratman says, "It's exciting to be part of a team of people that over the course of ten years was able to bring something back that had not existed in over a hundred years. No one person and no one group could have put this together."

A boon to the community

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) purchased the entire 8,000-acre Goose Pond site from a private landowner in 2005. As Brad Feaster, IDNR, Property Manager for Goose Pond, says, "Theoretically, the landowner could make more money by selling it in pieces, rather than one large chunk, which would lead to all kinds of complications as far as how to manage the easement. Obviously, the state and county had an interest in buying it so that the county could benefit and get some tourism revenue. But even more important than tourism and bird watching, is the benefit to the wildlife by having it managed as one big 8000-acre area." According to Feaster, with a larger landscape, a greater number of critters can benefit. When efforts are coordinated, more can be accomplished. "There is no other place in Indiana that has the acreage we have here," he says, "The NRCS really deserves a lot of credit for the restoration work they've done. They did such a good job at the restoration work and design; it makes it easier for DNR to manage. Whenever something is built right and done right, it makes it easier to take care of."

Barbara Simpson, Board member of Friends of Goose Pond (FOGP), states that FOGP was established in 2007 to assist DNR with their mission of conservation and to help community members take full advantage of the enjoyment, education, and economic development opportunities offered by Goose Pond. "We recognized how important this land was as the largest Wetland Reserve program in the State and one of the largest in the United States."

FOGP now partners with IUPUI Center for Earth and Environmental Science. Simpson explains that they offer weeklong programs for teams of teachers to visit Goose Pond to learn how to use the outdoors for teaching children science. The Center for Earth and Environmental Science also brings a high tech trailer to Goose Pond so that students can use equipment and conduct various studies.

Simpson adds that in July there will be the first ever biodiversity survey at Goose Pond. FOGP will partner with the Indiana Academy of Science and work with the Hanover Institute to put together the biodiversity survey. She says there is a lot of data on birds, thanks to Lee Sterrenburg, of the Sassafras Audubon Society bird-monitoring project. "The group of scientists will inventory as much bio data on the property as they can for two days in July. We are very confident that there are a lot of exciting things going on with respect to wildlife. We just don't yet have the data."

Other FOGP projects at Goose Pond include wildflower identification workshops, fun outdoor activities for students, teachers, and the general community, nature hikes, community birding days, and future bird identification classes. Simpson states, "Its location is establishing western Indiana as a corridor for wildlife. Goose Pond is a jewel to the State of Indiana."

Feaster says, "Goose Pond is within a 200-mile radius of Indianapolis, Louisville, Cincinnati, St. Lewis, and Chicago. People can take a day trip and spend the day here." He observes that the landscape changes and what you see will depend on the time of year. "You come now and you will see waterfowl by the thousands — sandhill cranes and whooping cranes. You come later in spring, and it is prime shorebird time, so you're going to see a lot of migrating shorebirds. If you come in summer, the prairies are blooming, with egret, herons, rails, and some nesting resident waterfowl. Come back in the fall and you see northern harriers, redtail hawks, roughlegged hawks, short eared owls. You return in the spring and you are back to the sandhill cranes. That's what's so amazing about Goose Pond. You can visit in September and then come back to visit in March, and it's totally different — a whole different guild of birds and landscape."

Joan Bethell, Executive Director, Green County Economic Development Corp, says that Goose Pond is a key asset for the local community. "It is providing a primary anchor for tourism based on outdoor recreation." She states, "studies are finding that bird watching is the fastest growing outdoor recreation in America, more than hunters and fishers combined. Bird watching employs 60,000 people and upwards of \$25 billion is spent every year. It is an economic plus for the community."



Sunset at Goose Pond.

Photo by Lee Sterrenburg

The future

Ann Mills, Deputy Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment, states, "NRCS will play a role in a vision for not just restoring wetlands, but as an example for restoring depressed rural communities to prosperity." She says, "Goose Pond has been restored to a functional ecosystem where the community and wildlife can work together again. I think that kind of beauty is rare, but hopefully will become less rare." Mills points out that Goose Pond will impact the economy for the entire region. "Private landowners serve a

role in protecting this country's great resources going forward," she says. "It's the people on the ground that make wetland restoration happen. That's the story that needs to be told: the people are a great resource of this country."

According to Feaster, the DNR vision for Goose Pond is to maintain the open landscape, keep the area a wetland and make Goose Pond a destination for people from all over the country. There are future plans for a visitor center, levee trails, and observation towers. School groups and community groups are invited and encouraged to enjoy and explore the Goose Pond property.

There is no cost for admission. Goose Pond hosts groups for bird watching, wildflower identification, biological water quality assessment, prairie soil studies, educational and scientific workshops, research, and outdoor enjoyment. "The 8,000 acreage makes this wetland unique. There is no other place like it in Indiana," he says.

The NRCS is hopeful that future Wetlands Reserve Programs can be utilized for those areas in Indiana that do not make good farmland, turning those taxpayer deficits into rural community assets.

Dave Stratman says, "There are many places, especially along the Wabash and among other major rivers in Indiana, that could be restored to wetland habitat. I am hopeful that the success we have had at Goose Pond will encourage the further success of this program in other places throughout Indiana, the Midwest, and the United States."

As Jane Hardisty aptly sums up, "NRCS was part of something really big that made a difference to the community, to the environment, and to all those involved." She nods and smiles. "Goose Pond is a National Treasure."

As the Natural Resources Conservation Service celebrates its 75th Anniversary this month, she has reason to be proud.

For more info:

<http://www.friendsofgoosepond.org/>

<http://www.in.nrcs.usda.gov/>

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