

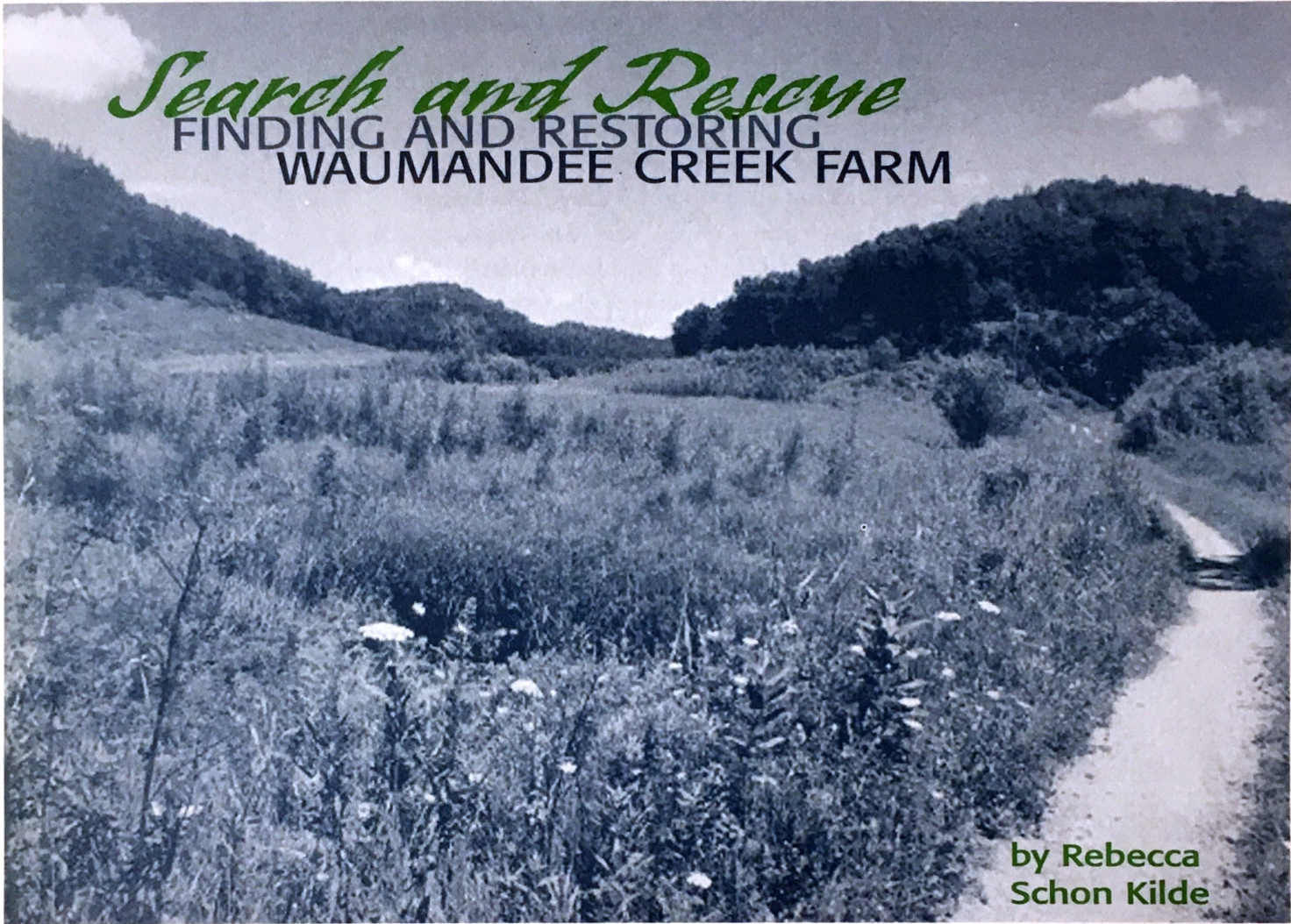
COMMON GROUND

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Search and Rescue FINDING AND RESTORING WAUMANDEE CREEK FARM



by Rebecca
Schon Kilde

Mike and Marcie O'Connor knew what they wanted long before they set eyes on Waumandee Creek Farm, they told me when I visited them in their sunny St. Paul home. "We drove every road in Pierce and Pepin counties every week for a year," Mike explained. When they found a piece of land they liked, they'd have their real estate agent call the name listed in the plat book, but they just weren't finding anything.

Then they spotted an ad in the Shopper for some land near Alma. Mike continued, "We weren't planning to go that far, and the land wasn't right. But the agent, Emmitt Rutchow, grew up there and knows everybody. He said, 'I have the place you want, but it's not for sale.'" Emmitt talked to the landowner anyway, and told him about Mike

and Marcie's goal of restoring the land to native vegetation. "It was the combination of a noble cause and a good price that decided him," Mike noted.

And so they bought Waumandee Creek Farm last spring, and began to restore the land as closely as possible to its pre-agricultural condition. The 430 acres includes about 150 of contiguous cropland, 50 acres of wetland, and about 8 acres of Bluff Prairies. "There aren't many places as pristine as this one *and* for sale," Mike said. They feel strongly that the prairie, reduced to less than one percent of its former range, needs to be protected wherever possible.

The O'Connors call the restoration a "recreational project," although the size of the farm makes it a bigger project than they originally envisioned. *continued on page 4*

“There aren't many places as pristine as this one and for sale.”

• **Waumandee Farm, from the cover**

“We like it. It's fun,” noted Marcie, who planted their St. Paul yard in native species and “ran out of room.” She has helped a local elementary school start a tiny prairie planting, and has done some restoration work on land they own along the St. Croix River.

Marcie, whose undergraduate degree was in botany, did the plant inventory at the farm with help from friend and consultant Barb Delaney and DNR Natural



Areas Management Specialist Randy Hoffman. “He's amazing,” commented Marcie. “He knows plants and birds, and it was great to walk the land with him.” They've inventoried nearly 200 plant species, including Cream Gentian (*Gentiana alba*), which is threatened in Wisconsin. They've spotted over 50 birds, as well as lots of butterflies, insects, frogs, reptiles and mammals. “There are earthen dams on the farm with little

ponds around them. They don't look like much, but they're full of tadpoles and frogs. Our son, Richard, especially likes the frogs.” Their son, Robert, likes to walk the land. “One of the nice things is that it's so big, we're always finding new things,” said Marcie. “We found a spring last week.”

So far, they've planted about 80 native species, all from southern Wisconsin and southeastern Minnesota, and will take another 15 acres of cropland out of production to plant this spring. “After the stands get going, we can collect seed from planted plots and existing prairie remnants.”

Marcie, who is also an avid birder, has seen birds she doesn't see much of in the city. They hope to attract grassland birds to the restored prairie sites, and have put up bluebird houses.

The restoration work itself wasn't the whole plan, though. The O'Connors realized how important it would be to preserve this restored land beyond their lifetimes. They heard about Wisconsin Farmland Conservancy on the internet, and contacted Rick Gauger before they had even bought the land. “He was one of our first visitors. He was there within a month of our buying the land,” said Mike.

Mike and Marcie weren't sure what to expect from the process of developing a conservation easement. The whole thing took about six months. The Conservancy's assistance was instrumental in developing a conservation plan that fit the O'Connor's vision. “Rick came up with the framework and possibilities, and we got to pick from that menu,” explained Mike. The process helped them to refine the details of the agreement. “We generated a world-class level of e-mail to the Conservancy, but the final easement is consistent with our goal: restoring pre-agricultural vegetation.”

Even the language of the agreement reflects the couple's priorities. “Traditional easements have a lot of archaic legal language, so we modernized it in this easement,” Mike told me. Mike has spent much of his career as a community organizer, and that commitment to the bigger picture shows in their approach to the process. “The old language isn't as strong legally. We've kind of contributed that to the cause.”

They also decided to wait for Wendy Walker to do the appraisal because, they said, she “has a blend of the appraiser's skepticism with an understanding of what we wanted to do. She's one of the few in the region who can do this kind of appraisal.”



left, Marcie O'Connor with Big Bluestem right, Randy Hoffman, DNR Natural Areas Management Specialist top, Mike O'Connor at Waumandee Creek Farm, with a view of neighboring farms in the valley below. All photos courtesy of the O'Connors.

The final easement stipulates that the land can't be divided or developed, although one house site has been set aside. Once cropland is taken out of production and restored to native prairie, it can't be disturbed. Trails can't be paved, and the agreement restricts recreational vehicles and horses on the land.

"The main thing is to keep it from being overrun by people who would abuse it. We don't want anyone to run an ATV over a restored prairie," Mike emphasized. "It's going to be like a park," added Marcie.

Mike and Marcie donated the easement to the Wisconsin Farmland Conservancy, and have given the Conservancy the opportunity to do tours and ecological assessments beyond what is required by law. "The donation of a conservation easement on this property was worth several hundreds of thousands of dollars," noted Conservancy director Rick Gauger.

"The dedication and commitment to land preservation and restoration that the O'Connors have brought to this project is phenomenal," Gauger concluded.

Volunteer opportunity: Assist in a prairie burn at Waumandee Creek Farm in April. Contact the WFC office for details.