

MONDAY, MAY 9, 2016



TAYLOR NYMAN, DAILY NEWS

Marcie O'Connor explains the progression of the restored prairie she has grown over the past 15 years on Wednesday in Alma, Wis.

'Unfarming' the land

Buffalo County
couple returning
property to
native growth



TAYLOR NYMAN, DAILY NEWS

The progression of the restored prairie land Marcie O'Connor has been working on for 15 years in Alma, Wis.

botany and said she's always been interested in doing this kind of work.

"I don't like lawns ... they're pointless because there's no habitat for anything," she said. "There's thousands of creatures that need to eat and when you put them on a lawn with nonnative plants, there's nothing for them to eat."

The O'Connors owned a house in St. Paul prior to purchasing their land — and Marcie unfarmed that as well. She turned the front yard into a prairie and the backyard into woods. They also had a cabin on the St. Croix River in Minnesota with a stream that ran through it, where Marcie planted native wetland plants

IF YOU GO

WHO: Marcie and Mike O'Connor of Alma, giving a presentation on their land project and what they've learned, including speaking on butterflies and moths and presenting photographs.

WHERE: Wings Over Alma Nature and Art Center, Alma, Wis.

WHEN: 1 p.m. Sunday, May 15

COST: Free and open to the public

BEN STRAND
Daily News

ALMA, Wis. — Owning 500 acres in western Wisconsin often means using that land for farming.

Marcie O'Connor and her husband, Mike, however, have a different plan. They're "unfarming" their acres, spending the last 15 years restoring the land back to what it would have looked like before European settlers arrived — prairies, savannas, wetlands.

They purchased 425 acres in 2000, 150 of which was previously farmed. Since, they've built a house and purchased 75 more acres across the road.

Marcie has a degree in

and restored the land into a wetland area.

Marcie said, from a historical perspective, she enjoys doing projects like these because it's neat to imagine and see what the land might've looked like before European settlement.

"Native plants were here before the Europeans came,

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they were here for thousands of years, and insects and plants in these areas evolved together," Marcie said. "Today there's a lot of *nonnative or invasive plants and species*."

Some of the native plants and species are still around but don't have the natural environment to grow and thrive in. Some of the prairies and savannas the couple has restored so far have grown back naturally after clearing the areas of the nonnative species and plants. Some of them needed additional nurturing, and Marcie planted seeds of native species to restore them.

"I plant things that I know are supposed to be here and there are certain things I let grow naturally,"

Marcie said.

In addition to successfully unfarming portions of the land they live on, native insects have returned — butterflies, moths, bees etc. Marcie said native birds and animals are also returning, but she focuses on butterflies and moths.

Marcie said she's identified a total of 82 different kinds of butterflies and 775 different kinds of moths.

"I just identified a new one last night and that was exciting," Marcie said.

Tackling a project like this isn't all fun and games. Marcie said she spends several hours every day working out on their land, with Mike helping out when he can.

She said one of the most difficult parts of the unfarming process is getting rid of all the invasive species, like buckthorn or garlic mustard plants, and making sure they don't come back. Garlic mustard

is a nonnative plant that prevents native plants from thriving because they take much of the necessary nutrients native plants need to survive.

"Animals don't eat them either, which makes it easier for them to spread," Marcie said. "I spend most of the year dealing with all the invasive species on the land."

They also trek through their land and girdle various trees that aren't supposed to be there, such as birch trees. It's a process that takes a while because it involves whittling a ring of bark around the trunk to prevent the entirety of the tree from receiving the necessary nutrients. After a while it will just fall over.

The nonnative plants, invasive species and trees they gather are scattered in large piles throughout their land and make for homes for animals and insects. Marcie

said they used to burn the large piles but stopped after a while because it does more harm than good to the land.

Marcie and her husband also keep track of areas of their land using eight trail cameras and a drone. This way, they're able to monitor the changes and growth of the land they've restored so far.

"They allow us to take pictures of the same place every year so we have a timeline to look back on," Marcie said.

There are a couple different trails the O'Connors have on their land that they walk every day. The one they walk most is about 2.5 miles long, and every time they leave they bring a camera and binoculars, because they never know if something new or different might cross their paths.

"We always bring them so we can look for insects or birds we haven't seen