



**Marcie O'Connor:** Back to basics where farming doesn't make economic sense.

## “Unfarming” in Buffalo County

By Marcie O'Connor

**I**n the spring of 2000 my husband, Mike, and I bought an old farm in Buffalo County in western Wisconsin. It's in the “driftless” area of Wisconsin, the area that wasn't covered by the last of the glaciers that receded about 10,000 years ago. So it still has very rugged terrain: steep bluffs, narrow valleys and cold, spring-fed creeks. We've spent the last 10 years “unfarming” the land---trying to bring back the prairies and savannas and wetlands that were here before European settlement.

Our farm was homesteaded in the mid 1800's, and was a dairy farm until the 1970s. When we bought it the cows were gone, but 140 acres were still being cultivated in a rotation of corn and soybeans. We're working on three major projects: planting prairies in the farmed fields; restoring and enlarging the numerous prairie and savanna remnants, and trying to remove exotic species from the large and diverse wetland.

As of this year we've planted prairie in all 140 acres of cropped land; we've cut and removed brush and invading trees from many of the rem-



*We planted our first prairie in a 16-acre soybean field in the winter of 2000/2001. This is the soybean field in the summer of 2000.*

*This is the same view three years later, in the summer of 2003.*

ants, and we've been moderately successful at removing reed canary grass and wild parsnip from big areas of the wetland.

We've seen big increases in the numbers of birds and insects now that there's more habitat for them. Grassland birds such as clay-colored sparrows, vesper sparrows and field sparrows nest in prairies that used to be corn fields. And the increases in butterflies and other insects have been dramatic.

One of the things that I especially like about our project is that the land we're working with is not wilderness. It's land that was farmed for 150 years. There are thousands of farms in parts of the country like ours, where farming doesn't make economic sense any more. Many of these farms still have remnants of the original habitat, and most could probably be restored to look more like the way they were before they were farmed.

To see lots of photos of the land and information about the projects we're working on, please visit our blog at: [www.prairieshaven.com](http://www.prairieshaven.com). If you leave a comment on one of the pages, I'll write back. I love corresponding with people who are interested in prairies and other native ecosystems.



*Field sparrows raise their young in a field that was once in corn*

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