



Photo: Prairie Habitat at Myeerah Nature Preserve by Tom Fishburn.

## **Ohio Crown Jewel: Habitat Restoration of Myeerah Nature Preserve**

**With Michael D. Retterer, Wildlife Biologist, Pheasants Forever Inc. and Quail Forever, Donnie Knight Jr. Biologist, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lori Stevenson, Coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ohio Private Lands State Coordinator, Ohio Private Lands Office, and Jackie Augustine, Director of Programs, Tri-Moraine Audubon Society, Bellefontaine, Ohio.**

## Introduction

Hello, this is Jackie Augustine, and I'm in the Program Coordinator and Executive Committee member for Tri-Moraine Audubon Society. Today we're here to talk about Myeerah Nature Preserve and all the habitat improvements that have gone on there.

First off, can everybody introduce themselves?

This is Donnie Knight, I am a Partners for Fish and Wildlife Biologist for the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service here in Ohio and I cover approximately thirty-four counties in southwest Ohio.

Hi, my name is Lori Stevenson, I'm also with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I'm the state coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Program, I'm at our Private Lands Office located in Newark, Ohio and I get to cover the whole state working on wonderful projects like this and with wonderful partners.

My name is Michael Retterer, and I am the coordinating Wildlife Biologist, Pheasants Forever Inc. and Quail Forever. I wear two hats, so I'm also the state coordinator for the Ohio Pollinator Habitat Initiative, so I'm pretty much statewide where ever there are projects going on.

Thank you, yes, I'm Betsey Merkel and I am co-hosting this call, I'm Digital Strategist and Network Developer for the Council of Ohio Audubon Chapters (COAC). It's wonderful to have everyone here today and I know we're going to learn many interesting things about the project at Myerrah.

## Back Story

**Jackie Augustine:** I'll just start out by saying a little bit about why Tri-Moraine Audubon Society ("Tri-Moraine") decided to host the next COAC Workshop at Myeerah and our history with the place and then hand it off to my colleagues to talk about all the wonderful habitat improvements that have been going on there.

Tri-Moraine Audubon Society has been working with the Girl Scouts of Western Ohio for a long time. They owned the property for a number of years but then there was an opportunity to sell the property. And Tri-Moraine, because of its history with the Girl Scouts and its history with the property, we decided that we wanted to secure that property as state and public lands.

With the Trust for Public Lands, Tri-Moraine wrote a Clean Ohio grant and was able to get money to purchase the property and so we purchased that and then transferred it to Bellefontaine Joint Recreation District who now owns the property.

We still hold the management easement on the property so we oversee all the habitat improvements that go on on the property.

We are real excited to have the workshop held at Myeerah so we can show off all the wonderful habitat improvements.

There's been a number of improvements, why don't we start out by talking about getting rid of the Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*)?

## Myeerah Habitat Restoration Project First Steps

[00:03:42]

**Donnie Knight:** This is Donnie Knight of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we began the project, I actually came on, Sergio Luisi was the biologist who started working with Tri-Moraine, from western Ohio, this is pre-Clean Ohio purchase, and Mike Retterer was involved in that as well. We started to take some of the old existing hay fields that at one point they were pasture fields, and we started to convert those acres back into tall grass prairie and pollinator habitat.

With that, the Camp Myeerah property or the Myeerah Nature Preserve property, the old pasture and hay lands, so a lot of it had reverted to a shrubby, woody landscape and unfortunately, most of that vegetation was non-native from the cool season grasses to the non-native Honeysuckle and Autumn Olive.

We began that process with a lot of mechanical clearing initially. We used a piece of equipment called a "Hydro Ax" which is an articulated sphere, hydraulically powered brush hog basically on steroids.

Then we've also done a lot of work with skid steers, same basic principle, hydraulically powered mowers and we mechanically cleared a lot of those acres because it was so overtaken by shrubs that we couldn't get anything, any kind of ground-driven unit in to start herbicide applications to successfully control once we converted those acres into tall grass prairie.

## Habitat Restoration Components and Process

**Jackie Augustine:** Thank you, that's a great overview. Why don't you give us an overview of some of the other improvements you've done on the property, such as the wetlands and the tree planting?

[00:06:17]

**Donnie Knight:** Yes. Once we got the fields cleared off and we had a pretty good start on the invasive shrubs, that work will continue and we can maintain prairie grass habitat as long as we're actively managing for woody succession, be it native or non-native invasives.

We got the site prepped and we began seeding, we did a lot of dormant seeding, which would be winter time, we did a lot of it over light snow cover, and we planted multiple species of tall grass, native tall grasses as well, along with the broadleaf wildflower plants.

Once we got that going, management is to basically continue monitoring and managing invasive shrubs. That can be done with the same techniques we used to get rid of them originally, mechanical treatments, spot spraying, and we've also started to add prescribed fire to the property, which is a great tool to do large amounts of acreage and we try to do those on a three-year rotation.

Since that initial project, that was about eighty-three acres, we've added approximately fourteen acres of pollinator habitat. We did a lot of the same preparation steps but we've done mixes that are a lot more dominated by beneficial pollinator plants. Host plants, like the Milkweed, for the Monarch Butterfly, or nectaring plants for the bees and butterflies and other pollinators.

Once we got that going, the next phase was a large tree planting. We cleared, again, multiple areas that totaled about forty-four acres, and we established those to a reforestation type project. We planted approximately thirty foot centers we used three gallon container stock hardwood trees and native shrubs. Because of the very healthy deer population at Myeerah, we had to spend the extra funds to install five foot tree shelter to protect the trees mainly from deer, but it also helps out with other things such as rabbits and small mammals.

That's doing well. The site manager on site for Myeerah, John Tracey, has been a great addition to this project. Since he came on, he's local, on a farm down the road, he, along with Pheasants Forever, our program, and the Tri-Moraine Audubon, have put in countless hours of in-kind services to keep these projects, not only get them established, but keep them going so they can maintain themselves long term.

Once we get the tree planting done, the most recent phase was a series of wetlands. Those were done by tile brakes and small berms to capture the water and be able to manage that water.

We've added native wetland plugs of various species, some cattail management, and we've also done some shrub plantings that would compliment the wetland habitat.

That's where we stand right now. There's obviously plenty more land on the Preserve to manage and we have plans for that. Probably in the next phase there will be another set of wetlands. So, the current wetland acreage is somewhere between five and six acres of wetland habitat.

## Restoration Phases Build on Project Successes

[00:11:06]

**Jackie Augustine:** This sounds great! It sounds like what I hear from you, is that if somebody has a property that they'd like to work on and they have a lot to be done, but you can do it in phases and build upon previous successes to expand each stage.

**Donnie Knight:** Absolutely! We advise landowners to do exactly that. Stage the project, separate it out into different areas and phases of the project because the worst thing you can do is bite off more than you can chew. You will lose confidence in what you can accomplish. The best scenario for the a lot of the land owners we work with is ensuring that the project we take on can be established and maintained successfully and as those projects mature, whether it be a wetland, a woodland, or a prairie, they're going to compete and maintain themselves to some degree and the (inaudible) doesn't have as much input in the long run and then as they get comfortable with the management techniques, they have the tools to do it and they have the timing and we can start picking off additional acres.

## Partner Skilled Capacities Generate Wildlife Results

[00:12:43]

**Jackie Augustine:** Sounds great!

Michael, can you tell us about your contribution to the project and maybe highlight what kind of insects and other animals we might find in these areas after the restoration?

**Michael Retterer:** Well, our contribution from Pheasants Forever, was to basically fulfill Donnie's agreement he had. I assisted with a lot of the installation and management practices. We did a lot of the clearing, the herbicide applications, getting the site prep ready, and assisted in not only the seeds but the more diverse plugs that were put out there from time to time. I did this through work, and our local chapters contributed time to it.

As far as the benefits of what was originally Camp Myeerah or Myeerah Nature Area, was that there is a plethora of wildlife species from many of the upland song birds that people see and I know that the Audubon group was interested in and had been monitoring for many years and what was initially sparked the restoration process, was some of the birds showing decline because of the succession.

The goal was to open those areas backup and to increase those numbers since we had historical data for it. All of these restoration techniques will benefit Turkey and deer and lots of other small mammals that are out there as well as the insect population from the Monarch Butterfly to the bees and native bees that occur in that area.

## Partner Contributions Yield Project Success

[00:14:45]

**Donnie Knight:** May I add? This is Donnie Knight again. I wanted to add that, Mike mentioned obviously the in-kind, the labor and the equipment that Pheasants Forever has provided, Mike himself and many of the chapter members, one of the critical aspects of the pollinator and wetland project was that the local chapter did add \$10,000.00 to the project.

That assisted us in not only purchasing some equipment that could be used long-term by the Tri-Moraine Audubon, the Bellefontaine Joint Recreation District, our program Pheasants Forever, but it also purchased a lot of the materials needed for the wetland restorations and a small portion of that even went to contractor fees for excavation and design to build the wetlands. I wanted to add that.

## Collaboration Leverages Partner Experience

[00:15:56]

**Jackie Augustine:** What I'm hearing is that another important part of this project is that it wasn't just one organization doing this, that this project is successful because Tri-Moraine, and Pheasants Forever, and multiple organizations are coming together. This is one thing that can really increase the success of a project.

**Lori Stevenson:** Jackie, this is Lori Stevenson, Fish and Wildlife Service. I'd like to say a few words as state coordinator of the Partners Program in Ohio about this project and about your process of thinking along those lines that with a project like this, Myeerah Nature Center, Camp Myeerah, it does take partners working together to be able to pull off a project like this at that scale.

When you think about it, there are a lot of working parts to the habitat component. When I take a step back and look at a landscape level project - this is one of those what I would term as a "crown jewel" on the landscape in Ohio because of all of the partners involved. The Audubon chapter, Pheasants Forever, Camp Myeerah, Fish and Wildlife Service, Trust for Public Lands - it takes everyone working together to do something at scale.

As Donnie and Mike alluded to, with all the habitat components out there and the size of the acreage, if someone is working with a partner, that can get very overwhelming. To think, "I'm going to try accomplish all this." But what we're advocating for, of course, is to do this in phases or stages, that's where if you have someone like Donnie working through the partners, and Mike working through the Pheasants Forever who are biologists, boots-on-the-ground, they can go and work with those partners and guide them through the process so that the project does happen but it is going to happen over a time-staged period.

They have the capability of reaching out to other partners and pulling in those other components of, “What other equipment should we be using?”, “What techniques should we use to maintain this prairie out here?”, “How are we going to get rid of all that Honeysuckle?”, and “Where do we get the equipment to do that?”

So, it’s using what they know and reaching out to other folks and pulling in all the working parts to make it happen. So this project is a wonderful example of a partnership that is positive and will actually keep working on it and keep going.

And the other part of this, not only the habitat restoration component, but the educational component of this too, getting school kids out there and teaching them about the different habitat components, that’s very important also.

## The ‘Ripple Effect’ of Conservation Projects

[00:19:34]

**Michael Retterer:** Yes, and this is Mike Retterer, and I just wanted to add too that is the neat thing about this, and Donnie had mentioned John Tracey, but he was out there and was interested and saw everything that was going on at Camp Myeerah, and then from that - seeing, experiencing, working with the partnership, going through the process, he in turn actually went and signed up not only his farm, but family members signed up their farms for programs to put similar habitats on their farms and landscape because of what they saw and what as going on out at Camp Myeerah.

So, that’s a really nice part of where you do these projects on public areas, people see the process and makes them want to do it too.

[00:20:23]

**Jackie Augustine:** That is exciting. This is Jackie and Tri-Moraine has been holding an environmental education weekend out at Myeerah Nature Preserve for the last thirty years. We’ve had generations grow up on the property and it’s fun to see the changes in our lifetimes of the habitat improvements that have been happening.

The Bellefontaine Joint Recreation District is also holding workshops and so a lot of people are seeing the changes and all the wonderful things a lot of work can do. I appreciate everybody’s contributions and that is something I was thinking about as I was listening to you.

Myeerah is public land but it sounds like there are opportunities for private lands too for people who are interested in that.

## Habitat Restoration Partners and Resources

**Lori Stevenson:** Yes, that's true. Through our Partners Fish and Wildlife Program, it is a habitat restoration program for landowners or any one who is private and does not own federal or state land.

We can work with individual private land owners if they are located within one of our focus areas in the state or any of the other public land that is not federally or state owned.

If there is a private landowner who is interested and wants someone to take a look at their property for doing some habitat restoration component like prairie habitat, pollinator habitat, wetland restoration, they would just need to contact us and basically in that initial phone conversation talk about what they have and what their goals are and if they fit in the goals of the partners program, then we can go from there.

**Jackie Augustine:** So they would have to search for, "Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program" and find their local office?

**Lori Stevenson:** Yes, depending on what part of the state they're in. For example, if they're in the part of the state of Dayton-Troy, Donnie would be covering this part of the state. I have two other biologists in the state. Another biologist sits up in the Ottawa Wildlife Refuge, Jeff Finn (Partners for Fish and Wildlife Biologist, Ottawa NWR) he covers the northwestern part of the state.

My office is in Newark and I have a biologist in that office with me, Brent Sodergren, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, he covers basically the whole eastern half of the state.

By touching base with any one of us four, we can get a conversation started and figure out what we need. If you need just a general phone number to my office I can give that to you. My office number is 740-670-5312 and that will get folks to Lori Stevenson, myself, and I'm State Coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ohio Private Lands State Coordinator, at the Ohio Private Lands Office. I welcome folks to give me a call.

## Additional Resources for Private Landowners

[00:23:44]

**Jackie Augustine:** That sounds great! There are great resources on this call. I think we have the basics down. Is there anything else somebody would like to contribute that hasn't been said yet?

**Donnie Knight:** Mike, would you like to discuss, we talked a little bit about our programs specifically, but with mentioning about John Tracey, neighbors, friends, and family that have signed up, would you like to just give a brief rundown of the Farm Bill Biologists Program and

some of the USDA programs that they work on that landowners listening in might be able to take advantage of?

**Michael Retterer:** Actually one of the original habitat projects that was done on Camp Myeerah with the Girl Scout camps was a prairie planting up above the large original pond and that was through a Farm Bill program.

So, essentially for private landowners there are some requirements. There are some sideboards to it, they have to meet certain conditions. Landowners that have agriculture land, that would like to maybe take unproductive ground or ground they're not getting good crops on, there are Farm Bill programs through Conservation Reserve Program they can sign up for.

There are also non-agricultural programs that anybody that has land can sign up for, there are limitations and contingencies but they can do forest programs, they can do wildlife habitat restorations, they can do pollinator planting, that's the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). And those are all through the local United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) offices and usually those lie within the US Soil and Conservation District Offices.

Beyond that, when I started at Pheasants Forever with Donnie, I was a Farm Bill biologist who assists landowners with those sign ups which is like what we've done and Donnie's done with Camp Myeerah through their process management. Working with the landowner for goals, find programs that match, find the right management plan for them and taking them through the process, that's available out there.

Both Fish and Wildlife Service, and Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, were all part of a grassroots initiative in Ohio, which is the Ohio Pollinator Habitat Initiative. It's really not like we have dollars to assist folks, but there's a lot of people that have many years of experience and a lot of technical advice through that program for anyone who's interested in what can they do on their property?

All of the major players are a part in that and we can help link them to programs or people who can help them get started on what they want to do. It's another clearinghouse of information.

[00:27:06]

**Jackie Augustine:** Great! Thank you for that information! Is there anything else anyone would like to add?

**Betsey Merkel:** I'd like to say that this has been a wonderful conversation and will supply so many people with so much information. I love that you have given the contact sources, places, and resources for people who would be interested in doing this too, or at least, starting the conversation.

This will be a wonderful article that we'll be able to publish and I encourage everyone who sees it to please share on social media so we can amplify the story and this wonderful case overview!

**Lori Stevenson:** Thank you on behalf of Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, thank you we appreciate this.

**Betsey Merkel:** Well, very good then. I want to thank Jackie Augustine, Director of Programs, Tri-Moraine Audubon Society; Lori Stevenson, Coordinator of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Donnie Knight Jr. Biologist, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Michael D. Retterer, Wildlife Biologist, Pheasants Forever Inc. and Quail Forever and State Coordinator for the Ohio Pollinator Habitat Initiative.

Thank you!