

CONANICUT ISLAND LAND TRUST

The grass is growing – little bluestem, that is!

“The grass is growing at the Parker Farm but don’t expect to see URI #2 or Kentucky blue grass. We have just finished seeding three acres with little bluestem and Indian grass,” said John Collins, a director of Conanicut Island Land Trust.

Working with \$35,000 of financial assistance along with technical advice from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Conanicut Island Land Trust has expanded the grasslands at the Parker Farm on East Shore Road in an effort to create high value habitat on the forty-eight acre property acquired as gift from Bert Parker in 2000. The Land Trust applied for the funds through the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NRCS). This program is designed to assist landowners in creating, restoring, and enhancing wildlife habitat and natural ecosystems and generally pays for 75% of an approved project.

For most of the 20th century the property was owned and operated by the Vieira family. Mary Ragland, formerly Mary Vieira, recalls that when her brothers, Alfred and Ernest, returned from World War II, they grew hay and alfalfa which they sold to farmers for feed and leased the farm house to the parents of Manny Dutra who now lives across from the Jamestown School. When the Vieira farming operation ceased in the late 1980’s, the existing hayfields and pastures quickly reverted to red cedar and invasives. This Spring the Land Trust, with the help of the NRCS, started the process of restoring the land to the fields that historically existed. Three acres of overgrown fields bordering East Shore Road have been transformed to open grassland. These grasslands are contiguous with three acres of existing fields owned by the Land Trust and approximately ten acres of open fields owned by a third party, creating sixteen acres of uninterrupted grassland. This grassland is bordered on the north by the heavily wooded thirty-two acre Rembijas property acquired by the Land Trust and the Town in 2002.

Joe Bachand, WHIP program manager at NRCS, said “This is a great use of WHIP funds, and the Land Trust has been a willing and able partner for the project. The combination of grassland habitat, shrubby areas and contiguous mature forest is ideal. The warm season grasses provide food and nesting places for a wide variety of songbirds. Hawks and owls will also benefit from mice and other rodents found within the grasslands created by the Land Trust. From an aesthetic point of view, you should not expect much the first season, as it generally takes awhile for warm season grasses to get established, but as the grasses take hold, the fields will be beautiful. Then once the grasses fill in the wildlife will soon follow.”

With the well-documented loss of farming in New England, there has been a sharp reduction in the amount of grasslands. Lands that were formerly hay fields and pasture have become forested or developed. Kate Giorgi, a wildlife biologist at NRCS, said, “As a result, many species that are dependent upon grasslands for food and cover have also been in decline. Songbirds such as the bobolink and Eastern meadowlark which build their nests on the ground require grasslands for breeding, while during fall migration, warblers and sparrows descend upon meadows and fields, particularly those near the coast, to feed upon wildflower and grass seeds. The northern harrier, listed as state endangered, and New England cottontail, a



Pictured are left to right: Fred Sousa of Fred’s Tree and Landscape, Joe Bachand of the National Resource Conservation Service, John Collins of The Conanicut Land Trust, and Katie Giorgi of the National Resource Conservation Service.

species of state concern, also benefit from grasslands.

Explaining the new landscape at the Parker property, Ms. Giorgi said, “We are excited about the creation of grasslands at the Parker property because a fifteen acre block of open land will provide meaningful habitat for species such as Eastern meadowlark which would not be attracted to a smaller field. The wildlife value of these fields will be immensely improved with the seeding of warm season grasses by the Land Trust this spring. Unlike traditional cool season pasture and hay grasses, warm season grasses, such as little bluestem and Indian grass, are native to the United States and mature late in summer. They provide valuable food and year round cover to wildlife.”

Land Trust president Quentin Anthony said, “This process started with Elizabeth Allen and Mary Hutchinson who convinced the Board that this was an opportunity that could not be ignored and the 25 percent financial contribution from the Land Trust was worth the end result. Throughout the fall of 2005 and winter and spring of 2006, board members Jim Estes and John Collins have pushed this project hard so the 2006 planting season would not be lost. Despite changes in the scope and design of the project, Jim and John forged ahead. John coordinated with NRCS almost weekly, and Jim designed the bidding specifications, oversaw the bidding process, and supervised the work by Fred’s Tree Service. The land is now cleared and seeded, and by next year we should have warm season grasses flourishing in the fields. The Parker property is open to the public with a parking lot on the west side of East Shore Road. We encourage the community to take a walk through the property and watch the project as it unfolds this summer and the years ahead.”

More about flora: Warm season grasses

What are native warm-season grasses and what are their importance?

Native warm-season grasses (nwsg) are grasses historically native to an area that grow during the warm months of the year and are dormant during autumn and winter. They differ from cool-season grasses, which make their active growth during spring and fall. There are many warm-season grasses native to our region; however, seven species are most commonly promoted as cover for wildlife and/or forage for livestock. These are big bluestem, little bluestem, broomsedge bluestem, indi-grass, switchgrass, sideoats gama and eastern gamagrass. Not all of these, however, have the same quality for wildlife habitat or livestock forage. For example, broomsedge offers excellent nesting habitat for bobwhites, but poor forage for livestock.

Using native warm-season grasses for wildlife habitat

Native grasslands are highly endangered ecosystems in New England. Historically, our region contained native grasslands which were main-

tained by fire. Today, that acreage has been replaced with non-native grasses (e.g. tall fescue, orchardgrass and bermudagrass), agricultural crops, forest cover and suburban development. As a result, several wildlife species dependent upon quality early successional habitat have experienced significant declines in population.

Nwsg can be used to enhance early successional cover for species such as bobwhite quail, cottontail rabbit, field sparrow, Henslow’s sparrow, grasshopper sparrows, indigo bunting, prairie warbler, dickcissel, Eastern meadowlark, loggerhead shrike, American kestrel, northern harrier and others. Fields of nwsg and associated forbs (broadleaf herbaceous plants) are also used by wild turkeys for nesting and brood rearing and by white-tailed deer for bedding and escape cover. Nwsg are established for wildlife primarily because of the structure of cover provided. Suitable cover is more often a limiting factor for species such as quail, rabbits and grassland songbirds than food, and nwsg provide excellent cover as well as food.



Importance of open structure

Because most nwsg grow in “bunches,” open space at ground level can be provided when bunches are not too dense. An open structure at ground level allows mobility for small wildlife (e.g., quail, rabbits, sparrows and young turkeys) through the field. Dense vegetation and thatch build-up (such as that presented by perennial cool-season grasses) inhibits movement and makes finding food (seed and invertebrates) difficult. When these conditions prevail, the number of animals an area can support is reduced, leading to stagnant or declining populations.

Sparse stands of nwsg with an open

structure at ground level are obviously attractive for brood rearing, but they are also used for nesting – one bunch of nwsg represents a potential nesting site – if the field has not been burned or disced in the past year. Birds and rabbits use senescent (dead) leaves of previous years’ growth to construct and line nests. An attractive characteristic of nwsg is that senescent leaves and stems remain erect into the following growing season. This reduces thatch build-up, provides protective cover through winter and allows birds, such as field sparrows, dickcissels and indigo buntings, to nest above ground amongst the senescent stems the following spring.

Although moderately dense stands of nwsg may not be as attractive for brooding, they are used for nesting and escape cover. Obviously, these stands may have more potential as nesting sites than sparse stands, but they also offer more protective cover, especially during winter. Extremely dense stands, however, inhibit movement of some small animals and become less attractive. At this point, management is needed to thin the stand.

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