NRCS Wildlife and Monarch Cost Share Assistance Programs

By Dustin Lamoreaux, Pheasants Forever

What’s out there?!
Several assistance options that help landowners manage their habitat for wildlife are available across the state of Oklahoma. The following Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQIP) are offered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and have technical and financial assistance available to landowners. They have been developed to address certain resource concerns in targeted areas of the state. Each program has established a specific Habitat Evaluation Guide to determine the limiting factors and document a benchmark condition. Once limiting factors are identified a management plan will be developed to address these factors and any other identified resource concerns.

Cross Timbers Initiative – An allocation will be set aside to fund applications for restoring wildlife habitats indicative of the Cross Timbers Ecoregion. This ecoregion is a mosaic of upland deciduous forest, woodland, glade, savannas, and prairie that dissects Oklahoma from north to south. Many savannas and woodlands have become thicker and composition has shifted as a result of prolonged fire suppression. This lack of fire also has resulted in the invasion of eastern redcedar and winged elm throughout all habitat types. Financial assistance is available for practices like prescribed burning; brush management, including cedar removal and timber thinning; and native grass plantings. These practices benefit a variety of grassland birds including northern bobwhite. Available Oklahoma Counties: Coal, Hughes, McIntosh, Okfuskee, Okmulgee, Pittsburg and Seminole.

Monarch Butterfly Initiative – The monarch has experienced significant population declines over the past two decades. Through Farm Bill conservation programs and technical assistance, landowners in the bulk of Oklahoma can help conserve monarchs by planting milkweeds and nectar-rich plants on their property.

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assistance, NRCS will work with partners and clients to increase monarch habitat on private lands. While the monarch butterfly occurs in 49 different states, NRCS is targeting their effort to the core migration route and the primary breeding range. In the southern Great Plains, the initiative’s focus will be on improving habitat for monarchs by restoring native grassland health. Applicants interested should expect and be accepting of management that aims to increase the numbers and diversity of fall flowering plants. Geography of the Monarch Initiative includes 67 of the 77 counties in Oklahoma, excluding the following 10 counties: Adair, Cimarron, Craig, Delaware, Haskell, Latimer, Le Flore, McCurtain, Ottawa and Sequoyah. This particular initiative covers a large portion of Oklahoma, primarily due to the fact that Oklahoma is in the heart of the monarch migration corridor.

Grassland Restoration Incentive Program – The primary objective of the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture’s (OPJV) Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) is to reverse the decline of grassland bird and pollinator populations through voluntary habitat restoration of private lands within the Oaks and Prairie conservation region. Interested applicants should contact Oklahoma’s GRIP Coordinator, Ken Gee at 580-319-8440 or kennethlgee@gmail.com to facilitate plan development and GRIP ranking. Available Oklahoma Counties: Craig, Carter, Jefferson, Johnston, Love, Murray, Nowata, Osage, Pawnee and Pontotoc.

Land managers interested in these cost-share programs are encouraged to contact the local USDA-NRCS Service Center for additional information. In addition, land managers may contact Dustin Lamoreaux, Quail Forever Biologist, for additional information at dlamoreaux@pheasantsforever.org or 405-742-1249. Keep in mind, when going to talk with these offices it is best to have a clear objective for the resources and wildlife species you plan to address.
Kid-Friendly Pond Fishing
By Kurt Kuklinski, Fisheries Research Supervisor

For kids, summer typically means no school and days filled with dirty hands, muddy shoes, and endless opportunity for adventure outside the confines of classroom walls. One kid-friendly adventure involves the feeling of a fish pulling on the end of a fishing line. Kids love summer, and fishing is woven into the very fabric of summer in this great country. With young anglers in mind, let’s think about your pond’s fishery and how appealing it may be for kids.

One common issue in Oklahoma ponds is overcrowded or stunted bass populations. This simply means too many bass are competing for a limited amount of food, resulting in stunted, or very slow growing bass. In this situation, most bass grow 10 to 12 inches in length, with few individuals obtaining greater lengths. This can be corrected by reducing the total bass population (usually through harvest), but from a young angler’s perspective is this really a negative situation? In addition to a lot of hungry bass to catch, stunted bass populations also usually produce quality sunfish populations.

When most bass are less than 12 inches, small sunfish (usually 2- to 4-inch bluegill and redear) are their main diet. Small bass eat a lot of small sunfish. But sunfish that survive past 4 inches now have virtually no predators and will grow to maximum size, up to 10 or 12 inches in many cases. So a stunted bass pond will offer two very appealing populations of fish for kids to target: plentiful hungry bass, and a healthy population of large sunfish. Add to this the fact that most Oklahoma ponds also contain healthy channel catfish populations, and you can see how appealing such a pond could be for youngsters.

Although it may not be ideal for experienced anglers, this scenario is ideal for kids who want to catch a lot of fish at a rate that will keep them interested. The best part is, it’s a win-win situation for landowners and kids. Landowners benefit by having an improved fishery through the harvest of stunted bass and the kids benefit through nearly endless catching excitement.

Overall, it’s important to remember that a pond that we might consider a poor fishery could actually be the perfect environment for young anglers. I hope you consider inviting kids to fish your farm pond this summer.
The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation presented its 2017 Landowner of the Year Award to Mayes County ranch owner Walter D. (Walt) Haskins. The award acknowledges outstanding conservation efforts on Oklahoma private lands.

Haskins is the owner and operator of the Mayes County Deer Ranch, a 485-acre property south of Locust Grove. When first purchased, the ranch looked very similar to the habitat throughout the county – extensive areas of mature, closed canopy mixed hardwood forest. But the ranch also had an extensive infestation of eastern red cedar (ERC). In Haskins own words, “…it was clearly in need of work…..” Using an intensive ERC eradication effort, and an ongoing prescribed burning program, Mr. Haskins has transformed his property.

As the name implies, quality deer management is one of Walt's primary management goals, but of equal importance is his goal to manage for wildlife and recreational diversity through sound land stewardship and a passion for sharing the property with others. A small portion of the ranch is dedicated to well-planned and distributed food plots managed for supplemental wildlife forage. The majority of the property, however, is managed for high quality, diverse native vegetation, providing excellent habitat for the diversity of wildlife indigenous to the area.

Mr. Haskins enrolled in ODWC's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) soon after he purchased the ranch, and began protecting young bucks while harvesting 35 to 40 does annually. To help reach those goals, Walt and his family began mentoring members of the local Boy Scout Troop, and over the years, many local Boy Scouts have gotten their first deer on the Mayes County Deer Ranch. He also continually utilizes the ODWC wildlife technical assistance program for guidance with habitat management planning and implementation. Through sound herd and habitat management, the doe-buck ratio goal was reached and continues to be maintained at the desired level, resulting in an annual harvest of...
The Oklahoma Land Access Program (OLAP) provides financial incentives to landowners who allow public access for hunting, fishing, stream access and wildlife viewing opportunities on private lands.

The Wildlife Department received a $2.26 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the 2014 Farm Bill, through the Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). OLAP aims to increase walk-in access opportunities for sportspersons while including and rewarding conservation-minded landowners. Landowners have the flexibility to maintain their current farming or ranching practices while providing sporting opportunities. Enrolled landowners are compensated based on enrolled acres, location, access type and contract length. Added compensation is available for properties enrolled in conservation programs, such as CRP, to further reward landowners making efforts to conserve and sustain wildlife. A bonus is available to multiple landowners who form local OLAP cooperatives.

Almost anyone who owns or leases at least 40 acres can qualify. Property boundaries are posted with signs, and parking areas will have informational signs indicating access dates and allowed activities. Enrolled landowners are accorded limited liability by existing state laws, and Game Wardens periodically patrol OLAP properties.

Landowners may temporarily deny access while ranching or agricultural activities are occurring. Access is limited to foot traffic only, and vehicles are prohibited.

For more information or to sign up, go to www.wildlifedepartment.com/OLAP.

Likewise, numerous family and friends are the beneficiaries of Walt's sharing nature, enjoying all that the ranch has to offer.

In summary, Walt's effort, dedication, and passion exemplify successful wildlife conservation on private land, and he is very deserving of recognition as the 2017 ODWC Landowner Conservationist of the Year.
When it comes to bobwhite quail, weather and habitat are important elements that contribute to their year to year production. Unfortunately, there is little a landowner can do about the weather. Thankfully, great habitat can help offset the highs and lows of the weather in a given year. For land managers wishing to enhance habitat for quail and other wildlife, a new quail plant guide is now available to assist.

A Guide to Plants Important for Quail in Oklahoma offers land managers an opportunity to identify plants important for quail and other wildlife and learn about their management. Overall, 70 plants are included with the guide including grasses, forbs (weeds), shrubs, and trees. But the guide isn’t just a plant identification guide. It also offers unique information of where each plant occurs within the state as well as its habitat preference, flowering period, insect attractiveness, and food and cover use by quail.

In addition, the guide includes close-up seed images designed to aid in identifying the food contents of harvested quail. Perhaps the greatest feature of the guide for land managers are the management options listed to promote or control each plant for wildlife. Often, knowing when, how, and where to direct such practices as diskimg, burning, grazing, mowing, spraying, thinning, or cutting can be the difference between having good habitat for quail versus habitat which is much less desirable. Overall, the guide was developed to be an easy-to-understand and easy-to-use management tool for land managers across the state.

To download a pdf version of the guide, visit http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-10890/E-1047. In addition, print copies are available by visiting the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management office (008C Ag Hall) on the campus of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma or by scheduling a technical assistance private lands visit with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation private lands biologist in your region.
A newsletter promoting wildlife and fisheries management on Oklahoma's private lands.